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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

JULY

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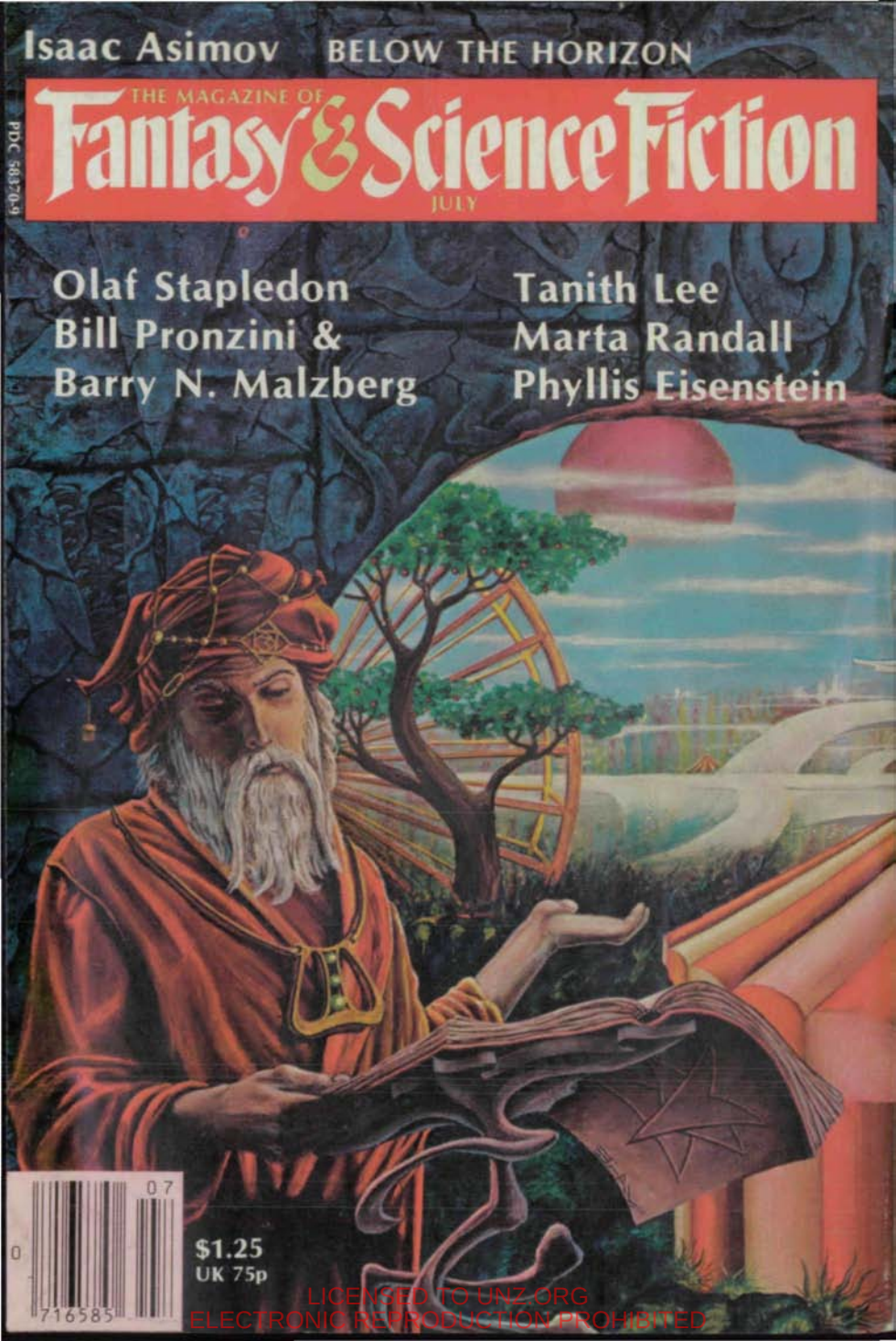

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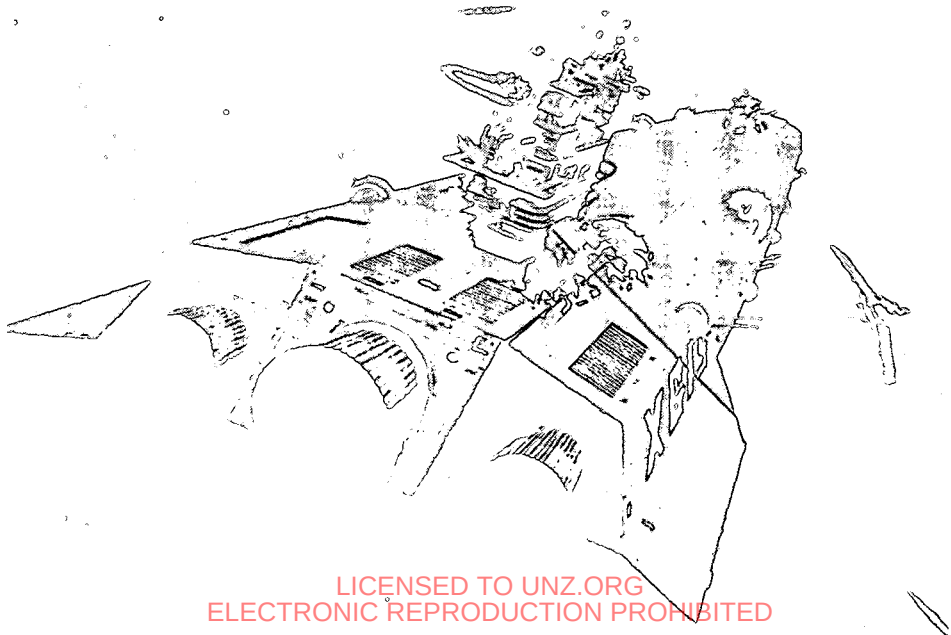

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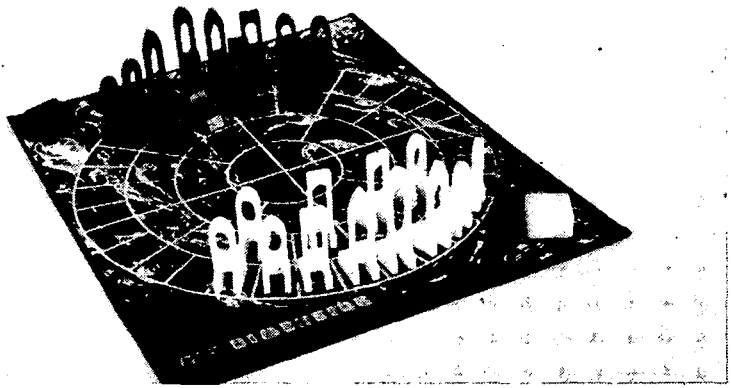

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Tanith Lee is a young Englishwoman, a native Londoner, who has been hooked on fantasy since reading the work of Jane Gaskell in her adolescence. This is her first story for F&SF, but she has built up a considerable following from her several novels, which include DON'T BITE THE SUN (DAW) and her latest, ELECTRIC FOREST, a Science Fiction Book Club selection.

Red As Blood

BY

TANITH LEE

The beautiful Witch Queen flung open the ivory case of the magic mirror. Of dark gold the mirror was, dark gold as the hair of the Witch Queen that poured down her back. Dark gold the mirror was, and ancient as the seven stunted black trees growing beyond the pale blue glass of the window.

"Speculum, speculum," said the Witch Queen to the magic mirror. *"Dei gratia."*

"Volente Deo. Audio."

"Mirror," said the Witch Queen. "Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress," replied the mirror. "And all in the land. But one."

"Mirror, mirror, who is it you do not see?"

"I do not see Bianca."

The Witch Queen crossed herself. She shut the case of the mirror and, walking slowly to the window, looked out at the old trees through the panes of pale blue glass.

Fourteen years ago, another woman had stood at this window, but she was not like the Witch Queen. The wo-

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man had black hair that fell to her ankles; she had a crimson gown, the girdle worn high beneath her breasts, for she was far gone with child. And this woman had thrust open the glass casement on the winter garden, where the old trees crouched in the snow. Then, taking a sharp bone needle, she had thrust it into her finger and shaken three bright drops on the ground. "Let my daughter have," said the woman, "hair black as mine, black as the wood of these warped and arcane trees. Let her have skin like mine, white as this snow. And let her have my mouth, red as my blood." And the woman had smiled and licked at her finger. She had a crown on her head; it shone in the dusk like a star. She never came to the window before dusk: she did not like the day. She was the first Queen, and she did not possess a mirror.

The second Queen, the Witch Queen, knew all this. She knew how, in giving birth, the first Queen had died. Her coffin had been carried into the cathedral and masses had been said. There was an ugly rumor — that a splash of holy water had fallen on the corpse and the dead flesh had smoked. But the first Queen had been reckoned unlucky for the kingdom. There had been a strange plague in the land since she came there, a wasting disease for which there was no cure.

Seven years went by. The King married the second Queen, as unlike the first as frankincense to myrrh.

"And this is my daughter," said the King to his second Queen.

There stood a little girl child, nearly seven years of age. Her black hair hung to her ankles, her skin was white as snow. Her mouth was red as blood, and she smiled with it.

"Bianca," said the King, "you must love your new mother."

Bianca smiled radiantly. Her teeth were bright as sharp bone needles.

"Come," said the Witch Queen, "come, Bianca. I will show you my magic mirror."

"Please, Mamma," said Bianca softly, "I do not like mirrors."

"She is modest," said the King. "And delicate. She never goes out by day. The sun distresses her."

That night, the Witch Queen opened the case of her mirror.

"Mirror. Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress. And all in the land. But one."

"Mirror, mirror, who is it you do not see?"

"I do not see Bianca."

The second Queen gave Bianca a tiny crucifix of golden filigree. Bianca would not accept it. She ran to her father and whispered, "I am afraid. I do not like to think of Our Lord dying in agony on His cross. She means to frighten me. Tell her to take it away."

The second Queen grew wild white roses in her garden and invited Bianca to walk there after sundown. But Bianca shrank away. She whispered to her father, "The thorns will tear me. She means me to be hurt."

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When Bianca was twelve years old, the Witch Queen said to the King, "Bianca should be confirmed so that she may take Communion with us."

"This may not be," said the King. "I will tell you, she has not been Christened, for the dying word of my first wife was against it. She begged me, for her religion was different from ours. The wishes of the dying must be respected."

"Should you not like to be blessed by the Church," said the Witch Queen to Bianca. "To kneel at the golden rail before the marble altar. To sing to God, to taste the ritual Bread and sip the ritual Wine."

"She means me to betray my true mother," said Bianca to the King. "When will she cease tormenting me?"

The day she was thirteen, Bianca rose from her bed, and there was a red stain there, like a red, red flower.

"Now you are a woman," said her nurse.

"Yes," said Bianca. And she went to her true mother's jewel box, and out of it she took her mother's crown and set it on her head.

When she walked under the old black trees in the dusk, the crown shone like a star.

The wasting sickness, which had left the land in peace for thirteen years, suddenly began again, and there was no cure.

The Witch Queen sat in a tall chair before a window of pale green and dark white glass, and in her hands she held a Bible bound in rosy silk.

"Majesty," said the huntsman, bowing very low.

He was a man, forty years old, strong and handsome, and wise in the hidden lore of the forests, the occult lore of the earth. He could kill too, for it was his trade, without faltering. The slender fragile deer he could kill, and the moon-winged birds, and the velvet hares with their sad, foreknowing eyes. He pitied them, but pitying, he killed them. Pity could not stop him. It was his trade.

"Look in the garden," said the Witch Queen.

The hunter looked through a dark white pane. The sun had sunk, and a maiden walked under a tree.

"The Princess Bianca," said the huntsman.

"What else?" asked the Witch Queen.

The huntsman crossed himself.

"By Our Lord, Madam, I will not say."

"But you know."

"Who does not?"

"The King does not."

"Nor he does."

"Are you a brave man?" asked the Witch Queen.

"In the summer, I have hunted and slain boar. I have slaughtered wolves in winter."

"But are you brave enough?"

"If you command it, Lady," said the huntsman, "I will try my best."

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The Witch Queen opened the Bible at a certain place, and out of it she drew a flat silver crucifix, which had been resting against the words: *Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night.... Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness.*

The huntsman kissed the crucifix and put it about his neck beneath his shirt.

"Approach," said the Witch Queen, "and I will instruct you in what to say."

Presently, the huntsman entered the garden, as the stars were burning up in the sky. He strode to where Bianca stood under a stunted dwarf tree, and he kneeled down.

"Princess," he said. "Pardon me, but I must give you ill tidings."

"Give them then," said the girl, toying with the long stem of a wan, night-growing flower which she had plucked.

"Your stepmother, that accursed jealous witch, means to have you slain. There is no help for it but you must fly the palace this very night. If you permit, I will guide you to the forest. There are those who will care for you until it may be safe for you to return."

Bianca watched him, but gently trustingly.

"I will go with you, then," she said.

They went by a secret way out of the garden, through a passage under the ground, through a tangled orchard, by a broken road between great overgrown hedges.

Night was a pulse of deep, flickering blue when they came to the forest. The branches of the forest overlapped and intertwined, like leading in a window, and the sky gleamed dimly through like panes of blue-colored glass.

"I am weary," sighed Bianca. "May I rest a moment?"

"By all means," said the huntsman. "In the clearing there, foxes come to play by night. Look in that direction, and you will see them."

"How clever you are," said Bianca. "And how handsome." She sat on the turf and gazed at the clearing.

The huntsman drew his knife silently and concealed it in the folds of his cloak. He stooped above the maiden.

"What are you whispering?" demanded the huntsman, laying his hand on her wood-black hair.

"Only a rhyme my mother taught me."

The huntsman seized her by the hair and swung her about so her white throat was before him, stretched ready for the knife. But he did not strike, for there in his hand he held the dark golden locks of the Witch Queen, and her face laughed up at him, and she flung her arms about him, laughing.

"Good man, sweet man, it was only a test of you. Am I not a witch? And do you not love me?"

The huntsman trembled, for he did love her, and she was pressed so close her heart seemed to beat within his own body.

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"Put away the knife. Throw away the silly crucifix. We have no need of these things. The King is not one half the man you are."

And the huntsman obeyed her, throwing the knife and the crucifix far off among the roots of the trees. He gripped her to him and she buried her face in his neck, and the pain of her kiss was the last thing he felt in this world.

The sky was black now. The forest was blacker. No foxes played in the clearing. The moon rose and made white lace through the boughs, and through the backs of the huntsman's empty eyes. Bianca wiped her mouth on a dead flower.

"Seven asleep, seven awake," said Bianca. "Wood to wood. Blood to blood. Thee to me."

There came a sound like seven huge rendings, distant by the length of several trees, a broken road, an orchard, an underground passage. Then a sound like seven huge single footfalls. Nearer. And nearer.

Hop, hop, hop, hop. Hop, hop, hop.

In the orchard, seven black shudderings.

On the broken road, between the high hedges, seven black creepings.

Brush crackled, branches snapped.

Through the forest, into the clearing, pushed seven warped, mis-shapen, hunched-over, stunted things. Woody-black mossy fur, woody-black bald masks. Eyes like glittering cracks, mouths like moist caverns. Lichen beards. Fingers of twiggy gristle. Grinning. Kneeling. Faces pressed to the earth.

"Welcome," said Bianca.

The Witch Queen stood before a window of glass like diluted wine. She looked at the magic mirror.

"Mirror. Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress. I see a man in the forest. He went hunting, but not for deer. His eyes are open, but he is dead. I see all in the land. But one."

The Witch Queen pressed her palms to her ears.

Outside the window, the garden lay, empty of its seven black and stunted dwarf trees.

"Bianca," said the Queen.

The windows had been draped and gave no light. The light spilled from a shallow vessel, light in a sheaf, like pastel wheat. It glowed upon four swords that pointed east and west, that pointed north and south.

Four winds had burst through the chamber, and the grey-silver powders of Time.

The hands of the Witch Queen floated like folded leaves on the air, and through the dry lips the Witch Queen chanted:

"Pater omnipotens, mitere digneris sanctum Angelum tuum de Infernis."

The light faded, and grew brighter.

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There, between the hilts of the four swords, stood the Angel Lucefiel, somberly gilded, his face in shadow, his golden wings spread and glazing at his back.

"Since you have called me, I know your desire. It is a comfortless wish. You ask for pain."

"You speak of pain, Lord Lucefiel, who suffer the most merciless pain of all. Worse than the nails in the feet and wrists. Worse than the thorns and the bitter cup and the blade in the side. To be called upon for evil's sake, which I do not, comprehending your true nature, son of God, brother of The Son."

"You recognize me, then. I will grant what you ask."

And Lucefiel, (by some named Satan, Rex Mundi, but nevertheless the left hand, the sinister hand of God's design), wrenched lightning from the ether and cast it at the Witch Queen.

It caught her in the breast. She fell.

The sheaf of light towered and lit the golden eyes of the Angel, which were terrible, yet luminous with compassion, as the swords shattered and he vanished.

The Witch Queen pulled herself from the floor of the chamber, no longer beautiful, a withered, slobbering hag.

Into the core of the forest, even at noon, the sun never shone. Flowers propagated in the grass, but they were colorless. Above, the black-green roof hung down nets of thick green twilight through which albino butterflies and moths feverishly drizzled. The trunks of the trees were smooth as the stalks of underwater weeds. Bats flew in the daytime, and birds who believed themselves to be bats.

There was a sepulcher, dripped with moss. The bones had been rolled out, had rolled around the feet of seven twisted dwarf trees. They looked like trees. Sometimes they moved. Sometimes something like an eye glittered, or a tooth, in the wet shadows.

In the shade of the sepulcher door sat Bianca, combing her hair.

A lurch of motion disturbed the thick twilight.

The seven trees turned their heads.

A hag emerged from the forest. She was crook-backed, and her head was poked forward, predatory, withered and almost hairless, like a vulture's.

"Here we are at last," grated the hag, in a vulture's voice.

She came closer and cranked herself down on her knees and bowed her face into the turf and the colorless flowers.

Bianca sat and gazed at her. The hag lifted herself. Her teeth were yellow palings.

"I bring you the homage of witches, and three gifts," said the hag.

"Why should you do that?"

"Such a quick child, and only fourteen years. Why? Because we fear you. I bring you gifts to curry favor."

Bianca laughed. "Show me."

The hag made a pass in the green

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air. She held a silken cord worked curiously with plaited human hair.

"Here is a girdle which will protect you from the devices of priests, from crucifix and chalice and the accursed holy water. In it are knotted the tresses of a virgin, and of a woman no better than she should be, and of a woman dead. And here —" a second pass and a comb was in her hand, lacquered blue over green — "a comb from the deep sea, a mermaid's trinket, to charm and subdue. Part your locks with this, and the scent of ocean will fill men's nostrils and the rhythm of the tides their ears, the tides that bind men like chains. Last," added the hag, "that old symbol of wickedness, the scarlet fruit of Eve, the apple red as blood. Bite, and the understanding of Sin, which the serpent boasted of, will be made known to you." And the hag made her last pass in the air and extended the apple, with the girdle and the comb, towards Bianca.

Bianca glanced at the seven stunted trees.

"I like her gifts, but I do not quite trust her."

The bald masks peered from their shaggy beardings. Eyelets glinted. Twiggy claws clacked.

"All the same," said Bianca, "I will let her tie the girdle on me, and comb my hair herself."

The hag obeyed, simpering. Like a toad she waddled to Bianca. She tied on the girdle. She parted the ebony hair. Sparks sizzled, white from the girdle, peacock's eye from the comb.

"And now, hag, take a little bite of the apple."

"It will be my pride," said the hag, "to tell my sisters I shared this fruit with you." And the hag bit into the apple, and mumbled the bite noisily, and swallowed, smacking her lips.

Then Bianca took the apple and bit into it.

Bianca screamed — and choked.

She jumped to her feet. Her hair whirled about her like a storm cloud. Her face turned blue, then slate, then white again. She lay on the pallid flowers, neither stirring nor breathing.

The seven dwarf trees rattled their limbs and their bear-shaggy heads, to no avail. Without Bianca's art they could not hop. They strained their claws and ripped at the hag's sparse hair and her mantle. She fled between them. She fled into the sunlit acres of the forest, along the broken road, through the orchard, into a hidden passage.

The hag re-entered the palace by the hidden way, and the Queen's chamber by a hidden stair. She was bent almost double. She held her ribs. With one skinny hand she opened the ivory case of the magic mirror.

"*Speculum, speculum. Dei gratia.* Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress. And all in the land. And I see a coffin."

"Whose corpse lies in the coffin?"

"That I cannot see. It must be Bianca."

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The hag, who had been the beautiful Witch Queen, sank into her tall chair before the window of pale cucumber green and dark white glass. Her drugs and potions waited ready to reverse the dreadful conjuring of age the Angel Lucefiel had placed on her, but she did not touch them yet.

The apple had contained a fragment of the flesh of Christ, the sacred wafer, the Eucharist.

The Witch Queen drew her Bible to her and opened it randomly.

And read, with fear, the words: *Resurgat.*

It appeared like glass, the coffin, milky glass. It had formed this way. A thin white smoke had risen from the skin of Bianca. She smoked as a fire smokes when a drop of quenching water falls on it. The piece of Eucharist had stuck in her throat. The Eucharist, quenching water to her fire, caused her to smoke.

Then the cold dews of night gathered, and the colder atmospheres of midnight. The smoke of Bianca's quenching froze about her. Frost formed in exquisite silver scrollwork all over the block of misty ice which contained Bianca.

Bianca's frigid heart could not warm the ice. Nor the sunless green twilight of the day.

You could just see her, stretched in the coffin, through the glass. How lovely she looked, Bianca. Black as ebony, white as snow, red as blood.

The trees hung over the coffin. Years passed. The trees sprawled about the coffin, cradling it in their arms. Their eyes wept fungus and green resin. Green amber drops hardened like jewels in the coffin of glass.

"Who is that, lying under the trees?" the Prince asked, as he rode into the clearing.

He seemed to bring a golden moon with him, shining about his golden head, on the golden armor and the cloak of white satin blazoned with gold and blood and ink and sapphire. The white horse trod on the colorless flowers, but the flowers sprang up again when the hoofs had passed. A shield hung from the saddle bow, a strange shield. From one side it had a lion's face, but from the other, a lamb's face.

The trees groaned and their heads split on huge mouths.

"Is this Bianca's coffin?" said the Prince.

"Leave her with us," said the seven trees. They hauled at their roots. The ground shivered. The coffin of ice-glass gave a great jolt, and a crack bisected it.

Bianca coughed.

The jolt had precipitated the piece of Eucharist from her throat.

In a thousand shards the coffin shattered, and Bianca sat up. She stared at the Prince, and she smiled.

"Welcome, beloved," said Bianca.

She got to her feet and shook out her hair, and began to walk towards the Prince on the pale horse.

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But she seemed to walk into a shadow, into a purple room; then into a crimson room whose emanations lanced her like knives. Next she walked into a yellow room where she heard the sound of crying which tore her ears. All her body seemed stripped away; she was a beating heart. The beats of her heart became two wings. She flew. She was a raven, then an owl. She flew into a sparkling pane. It scorched her white. Snow white. She was a dove.

She settled on the shoulder of the Prince and hid her head under her wing. She had no longer anything black about her, and nothing red.

"Begin again now, Bianca," said the Prince. He raised her from his shoulder. On his wrist there was a mark. It was like a star. Once a nail had been driven in there.

Bianca flew away, up through the roof of the forest. She flew in at a delicate wine window. She was in the palace. She was seven years old.

The Witch Queen, her new mother, hung a filigree crucifix around her neck. "Mirror," said the Witch Queen. "Whom do you see?"

"I see you, mistress," replied the mirror. "And all in the land. I see Bianca."

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Here is a first-rate story, the first of many we hope, from Grania Davis who writes: "I live near San Francisco, with a husband and children and enjoy the unusual local distinction of not *being divorced, though I do keep up with local (Marin County) trends by owning a hot tub and a peacock feather. I am the author of one published novel, DR. GRASS (Avon) and will have another out shortly."*

Jumping the Line

BY

GRANIA DAVIS

There was a subaudible rumbling far up ahead. It acted like a trigger to Bi, even in sound sleep. He had been sleeping, hadn't he? Yes, the night was still deep, and he had been dreaming. He hadn't been dreaming about anything. That was funny, lately he had been dreaming a lot, but the dreams didn't have any content.

Others had also sensed the rumble of motion far up ahead and were awakening. Nothing would happen for a while yet, probably not until after dawn. But everyone wanted to be ready. Babies cried. Some cook fires were lit to boil tea. Others lay tense in their bedrolls, not wanting to face a long wait in the predawn chill, but not wanting to fall back to sleep, either.

Bi sat up. He didn't want to leave his warm, cosy roll, but he had to relieve himself. "Hold my spot," he muttered to nobody in particular.

It was just a *pro forma* request. Nobody jumped at night. He moved a little ways out, but not too far. You didn't want to be out in the bush at night, big critters might come around.

Bi found his way back to his roll and crawled inside. He was too sleepy to light a cookfire, and he really wasn't hungry or thirsty. Still, some hot bush tea would be warming. Maybe the family group up ahead would offer him some. But they never did, so why should they now? "Take care of your own."

Bi had been solo for a while now. He'd left his own family group because he couldn't stand the constant squabbles and fighting over ration. The family was too big, anyway, they didn't mind if a few dependents drifted off. So Bi drifted, enjoying the silence and solitude, *not* enjoying the hunger and big critters, until he had a chance to

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jump. And here he was, among strangers, but still waiting for that same rumble up ahead.

It was getting pinkish in the east, now, and folks were getting ready. Bi lit a very small fire and heated up some tea and a little ration. He felt slightly queasy, not really awake. He ate, wrapped up his mess kit and tied up his roll and sat down upon it. There was a definite feeling of movement up ahead, but it would still be a while.

The sun had risen through the morning mists, illuminating the low rolling hills and the grey-green grasslands. There was a steady drone of critters.

Bi sat on his roll with his head in his hands. He looked up ahead. There was that Pretty again, part of the big family group. She always seemed to be laughing, with high pink cheeks and dark tangly hair. If there had been some pretties like that in his family group, he might have stuck around. But they were all double-uglies. The laughing girl became aware of Bi's eyes upon her and pulled her faded quilted robe more tightly around her body. She was busy minding a baby, laughing and playing with it while its mother packed the kits and rolls.

But Bi had no more time to eyeball pretties. The feeling of motion was growing in the misty morning sun. The rumble became the sounds of individuals strapping up their belongings. It was happening just up ahead. Bi was ready to go when, like a single organism, a vast centipede, the long line began to move steadily forward.

How far would they move this time? No one could ever say. Sometimes they only moved a few yards, or a few feet, and then they came to a halt again. All the excitement and preparations for nothing. Sometimes they wound slowly ahead for half a day, through trampled grasslands and over the low rolling hills, until their seldom-used legs grew tired and their foreheads were covered with sweat.

But it didn't matter whether the line moved just a little or a great long distance. You had to be ready to move with it, or you would lose your place.

The afternoon fogs came up thick in the great, flat grasslands, muffling even the hum of critters. Bi was shaky with hunger and thirst by the time they stopped. This had been one of the longest moves he could remember, from dawn until the late afternoon. Slow, steady movement all day long. No chance to stop and rest, to cook tea and ration. Nothing but a few bites of gummy, raw ration and sips of tinny cold water to keep him going. Bi hated that. You were supposed to cook the ration to make it congeal into an edible form. And the tinned water was foul-tasting unless strong bush was steeped in it to make tea. But now they were stopping at last. Like a long audible sigh, people settled down on the damp, flat ground, spread their bedrolls, and began to light cookfires.

Then came another, welcome sound

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from way up ahead, the rumble of the carts. Bi waited listlessly, staring at nothing in the mist. The sun was just setting over a low rise of ground. You could see it illuminating a patch of swirling fog. For a moment the fog parted and a shaft of sun shone through, making Bi's eyes water. He rubbed them and looked again. He thought he could just make it out in the distance. Sometimes you could see it when the fog parted, though many folks said it was just a mirage. The Other Line, way off against the horizon. Another line, just like his own. Sometimes moving, mostly standing still. Another long line of people, briefly glimpsed against the horizon when the fog parted. Some people thought it was a curve or extension of their own line; other people thought it wasn't real at all, just a trick of the eyes, a reflection against the fog. But Bi figured it was just another line. If there was one line, there could be two. Why not?

When Bi drifted, he thought of going across the plain to check out the other line. But check it out for what? Why? And what about the critters? They get real big, way out in the bush, he'd heard. So he didn't bother. He just drifted, hungry and silent until he could jump a spot in the line. But he sometimes wondered, why were there two lines? Why was there any line at all?

The sound of the carts was quite loud now. Bi's stomach grumbled eagerly. He could see them, just up ahead. Big yellow carts of glimmery metal, stopping to service every family group or solo. They rumbled up to the family group just ahead. That Pretty with the tangly hair held a big tin under the long tube that dispensed water, while a triple-ugly held another tin under the ration spout. The carts were pulled by drifters who couldn't manage to jump and by misfits, troublemakers and ultra-uglies who couldn't get along in their family group. They were pushed out of the line, and when they got lonely and hungry enough, they strapped themselves to the carts and helped to pull, in return for their share of ration. But they lost their place in line, forever.

The long line of filthy, bent cart pullers finally reached Bi. A lot of the uglies were real weird, with twisted, deformed limbs and vacant grins. Some of them mumbled or jabbered or laughed to themselves. A big, dark ultra-ugly woman sang a low, steady, complicated song, making it up as she went along. A hunched-over ugly jabbed a twisted palm at Bi, who promptly produced his ration card. The ugly examined the crumpled, torn document, then gestured at Bi's tins. There was no one to help Bi manage the tins, and you had to be quick, before the carts went away. On the other hand, Bi's solo portion of ration and water wasn't very large. He held his two tins under the tubes, while the ugly pushed down the lever. The cart growled briefly in its metal insides and regurgitated a

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whitish, gummy substance into one tin and a brownish, slightly oily liquid into the other. The ugly stamped Bi's ration card on the back, and the big carts moved on.

Lucky that Bi had managed to thieve his ration card from his Ma's special pouch, while she was asleep. Some folks were foolish enough to drift without taking their card (or some had Ma's who were lighter sleepers), and then they could never jump back into the line. They had to become cart pullers. Bi's Ma always slept heavy, with her mouth hanging open and a thin snore. It wasn't too hard to reach into her pouch and find his ration card, the familiar card which he'd handed to the cart pullers, so many times. Bi briefly wondered how Ma was doing. Did she ever wonder about him, or even remember him? It was such a big family group.

Family groups. Bi looked up ahead. That Pretty was spooning ration into a big cookpot. Bi wondered if he could steal her at night the way he stole his ration card. Why not? He was feeling gappy lusty lately, with no family girls to relieve himself on, and he had to do *something*. He figured plenty of her own family men crawled into her roll at night. Who would know the difference? He could watch carefully as they settled down and see where she was sleeping, make sure that no one was actually sharing a roll with her. Then, when it got quite dark, he'd crawl into her roll, just like he belonged there. Wouldn't say anything, wouldn't let on who he was, but really relieve her good, night after night, until he finally let on who he was, and maybe he'd join up with her and the whole family group. At least he wasn't no ugly.

No, he didn't want to join up with them, they were just as bickering and quarrelsome as his own people. He'd hook her and persuade her to join him, solo. That'd be the way, catch his own Pretty, and start his own family group. Then he'd be Pa, and everyone would mind him. Why not? And he was feeling fearful lusty.

Bi lit up his little cookfire and stirred some ration and tea. The family group was eating, too. The tangle-haired Pretty had a good appetite, that was sure. Be sure to catch her ration card when you catch her! Now they were laying out their rolls. Good, her's was near the edge, not too far from him. Easy!

Except now some double-ugly old man from her family is coming up to talk to her and grin and leer and pat her body under her robe. It's clear he's going to stick around for a while. And the Pretty doesn't seem to mind, even though he's an ugly! She's grinning and leering back. Gap, they're all like that. Well, let that ugly old grandpa *try* to warm her up, if he still can — must be in his third decade, at least. When he's done, and crawled back to his own roll to sleep, then Bi will sneak up and warm her good! Bi would keep watch all night, if necessary. Why not? He

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had eyes like a night critter. Bi crawled into his warm roll, and prepared to keep watch.

But he must've been tired from the long move, because it was nearly dawn when he awoke. He could tell from the way the dark stood deep and dense on the grasslands. Both moons had already set. But no matter, there was still time, they were all still asleep. He crawled out of his roll and inched silently along the ground to the Pretty's roll. He remembered just where it was, and his eyes were good enough to see that there was only one body in the roll. Good. Bi reached his hands in and began to rub and fondle the body inside the roll. The flesh felt warm, smooth and slightly moist. Bi felt almost dizzy with lust.

The Pretty jumped, startled awake. But just like Bi figured, she was used to it. "You again?" she murmured. Bi grunted and crawled inside her roll. Her body, under the robe, felt so good. Warm and soft, with bony parts and fleshy parts, and sticky, hairy places where Bi could finally relieve himself and her too. Over and over again, not thinking about anything else, like one of his dreams, deep, but with no content.

The Pretty was used to it, but she wasn't used to Bi, that was sure. She was rumbling and heaving like a cart spitting ration. Until suddenly, Bi felt a sharp pain in his back. He looked up, startled, and realized it was already dawn, and that double-ugly old man was standing above them, full of hate and aiming another kick at Bi's back! Gap, the old man was kicking him and kicking him. Sharp stabs of pain in his back and legs and head!

Bi scrambled out of the roll, trying to protect himself from the kicks with one arm and reaching for his knife with the other hand. The knife had been a gift from his Pa. A secret forbidden gift that Pa kept hidden in his pouch. The ugly raised a big yell, when he saw it, and left off kicking. Bi went after him with the knife, but now the other men in the family had jumped up and were heading towards him. There were a lot of them, big and tough and mean. Bi broke into a run. He couldn't fight them all, that was sure, even with the forbidden knife. But as he ran, he looked back at the Pretty. She was staring at him, and when she caught his eye, she gave him one of her big, laughing grins.

Bi ran out into the bush, far enough from the line that no one would come after him. Folks who'd never drifted were powerful afraid of the bush, but Bi had faced the critters and solitude before. He sat down on a flat place, as the morning sun rose up through the mist, and tied his battered robe back around his short, muscular body. Well, he had relieved himself, that was sure. But he had also lost his place in line.

No matter, he could sneak back at

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night to get his roll and kit, and then he could drift ahead and jump again — and maybe he could persuade the tangle-haired Pretty to drift and jump with him.

Bi hovered near the line until the next night, foggy and dark, when everyone was asleep. Then he crawled back to grab the things. But he got a surprise. Someone was waiting, in a roll nearby. At first he got scared, thinking it was a double-ugly waiting to grab him. But the eyes that gleamed out were friendly, and that tangle of hair was unmistakable. It was her.

"You wanna drift and jump with me?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

"You got your ration card?"

"Yeah."

"Come on."

They silently packed up their rolls and his mess kit and tins and crawled back into the bush. It was still dark, nothing for a drifter to do but snooze and keep watch for critters. But with her along, there was plenty to do. They spread out her roll in a clearing in the bush, and both crawled inside. This time was even bouncier than before.

Dawn. Time to start drifting and watching for a chance to jump. Lucky the carts had just been along, so Bi's tins were nearly full. Enough water and ration to last near a week, if they were careful. Of course, it was pretty bad, raw ration and no tea, but you couldn't risk the smoke of a cookfire out in the bush. If drifters get caught, they're dead critters, fair game for any of the men in the line, looking for a little fun and excitement.

So drifting is a sneaky job, moving rapidly up along the line, moving ahead, always ahead. No one would be crazy enough to drift back. You could move fast that way, plenty fast. Much faster than the line, even when it's moving, with kids and old people, and all. Always careful not to make noise. Always staying at a distance so you can see the line, but they can't see you. Always crouching behind clumps of brush to eat or sleep or relieve yourself and scurrying across bare grasslands, hoping that the mist and fog would hide you from sight. And always, always looking for that chance to jump.

The chance to jump could come anytime the line was moving, and you had to be ready for it, ready to swoop in whenever there was a gap in the line. Like suddenly an old man would stumble, and his family group would stop to help him, and a gap would open up in the line, just for a minute or so, just big enough for one drifter and one pretty. Then you jumped into that gap, and no one could touch you, cause everyone knew that the line must always move at an even pace, with no gaps. Gaps cause confusion, cause the line to become disorderly. No gaps are allowed, therefore drifters could jump to close a gap.

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But gaps didn't happen often. The line, itself, didn't move often, maybe once or twice a week. And Bi and the Pretty only had ration for a week, at most. And when the line did move, most folk were very careful to keep a slow, steady pace, to prevent gaps. Old folks were helped, little folks were carried. No one wanted a gap. No one wanted a strange, dirty drifter jumping in between you and your neighbors in the line, that you've known all your life, and maybe even shared family doings.

When you jumped, the families behind and in front felt real mean about it, that was sure. They couldn't touch you, but they didn't like having you in their midst. That's why that double-ugly was glad for an excuse to start kicking at Bi. But now he had to find a place to jump, and find it fast, before the ration was gone and they had to turn in their cards and become cart pullers. So they waited and watched.

On the fourth day, they knew the line was gonna start moving, because of the rumble up ahead, and so they snuck up close. But the line moved ahead, fast and smooth, with no gaps at all. Bi and the Pretty broke into a run, trying to outrace the line, before it stopped again, trying, trying to find that essential gap.

"Bi, look up there!" the Pretty whispered, panting. "Looks like some old Ma fell."

Bi squinted into the misty sun. Yeah, perfect. Some old Ma was breathing her last, that was sure, clutching at her bosom, with her family checking it out and trying to grab hold of her pouch. Good, the old Ma had the pouch with all the cards in it. They couldn't move on until they got the pouch, and the old Ma was clutching at it, cause she didn't want to be left behind to die by herself.

Bi and the Pretty moved in closer. The family group ahead looked back uneasily, then began to move ahead. And there it was, the precious, beautiful gap! While the family was still fussing with the old Ma, a gap opened, big enough for two or more. with triumphant yelps, Bi and the Pretty swooped in from the bush and jumped a place in the line.

"We jumped ahead four days!" cried Bi, hugging her.

The Pretty was laughing and clapping with excitement. The family group ahead looked back at them, meanly. They hated jumpers, but no question, there *was* a gap, so nothing they could do. The family group in back finally got the pouch away from the wheezing, sobbing old Ma and came rushing back up, to fill their place in line.

Then some nice, quiet time in the line. Fine, fun, lovey time, playing with the Pretty, using his fingers to comb out the tangles in her rich, thick hair. Not much movement in the line. But Bi could see that, every week, the Pretty's stomach was getting bigger. He

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was gonna be a Pa, that was sure. Bi felt a little bit uneasy. He wasn't solo anymore. The Pretty was lots of fun, but now a noisy baby to look out for, too. His dreams began to be filled with critters.

But luck was like a morning fog, it comes and goes, like his Ma used to say. One day, there was the Pretty, laying out on her roll, with her legs spread out, her stomach like a big mound, her hair more tangled than usual, and whining and crying and sweating, trying to give birth. Then came a rumble up ahead, the sound of the line getting ready to move.

"The line is gonna move!" said Bi, excitedly. It hadn't moved much in weeks, so this could be a long one. Maybe it would get the Pretty's mind off her birthing. She was taking too long at it, anyway.

"Come on and get ready," said Bi, poking at the spread-eagled body with his foot, "sounds like it's gonna move soon, we got to pack up your roll."

The Pretty stared up at him, glassy eyed, sweat running down her face, even though it was a chilly, foggy day.

"What's the matter," said Bi, "can't you hear the line moving? You can do your birthing later. Get up, and I'll help you with your roll."

"I can't," she whispered.

"What do you mean, *can't!* You got legs, don't you?"

"It hurts too much."

"But you gotta! We'll never get a good place like this, so far up the line, with ration and water so fresh and all. We can't stay here and lose it!"

"I can't," she repeated. "You go with the line. Don't leave any gap. Keep my spot, and I'll catch up when I'm done birthing."

"Yeah, well, I guess so," said Bi, uneasily. "But I heard folks need help with birthing. Don't you need help?"

"What kind of help?"

"I don't know, I never done it before. Gap, I wish my old Ma was here! Come on and try. Maybe the line won't move far. You can stop birthing now, and do it later. I can't carry you, 'cause you're too heavy, but I'll carry all the kits and rolls this time. If you stay here by yourself, the critters might get you!"

"Then stay here with me!" The Pretty started to cry.

"No, I can't do that, we'll lose our place for good. I'll do like you said, if you *really* can't get up, but you should try, you know. I'll keep our place in line, and you can catch up later. Maybe the line won't move far. Maybe the birthing is almost finished. Maybe.... Anyway, I'll leave you some ration. When you're done, just run along the line until you find me. I'll keep your spot. But stay hidden, so they don't think you're a drifter. When you find me, yell loud, and I'll tell everyone I held your spot while you were birthing." Bi looked at her anxiously. "That sounds good, don't it?"

"Yeah, okay," whispered the sad, sweaty Pretty.

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The line was nearly ready to move now. Bi hastily packed up his roll and tins, leaving her with the cookpot full of ration and water.

"See, I'm leaving the cookpot. Don't forget it, and hurry up, 'cause I'll be hungry with no pot. And don't forget your roll, neither."

"I won't," she grimaced, clutching at her belly.

"You sure you can't get up?" asked Bi.

She didn't bother to answer.

"That jumping Pretty is gonna give birth real soon, that's for sure. Serves her right," cackled an old Ma in the family group up ahead.

"See, it's gonna be soon," said Bi, "then you can catch up."

Sweat and crying were running down the Pretty's face. She still didn't answer.

The line was actually starting to move now. Bi picked up his roll and kit and patted her stomach. "I'll watch for you," he said.

The Pretty clutched her stomach and didn't pay any attention. Bi shrugged his shoulders, kind of miffed at her indifference to him and the moving line. Then he began to walk slowly and steadily ahead, so as not to create a gap. He looked back a few times, but soon her body was lost in the fog. After a while he stopped fussing about her, figuring she'd be okay, until she caught up. And it was hard work, because the line was moving slightly uphill and the sun was warm now and the line moved all day, far into the night.

"That was a real long move," said Bi, as he finally threw down his roll and dropped, exhausted. It wasn't until later that he realized that there was no longer anyone to talk to. He missed that, but he missed his cookpot real bad, 'cause he was very hungry and cold ration and water taste awful.

He got a whole lot hungrier soon, 'cause something was wrong with the carts. Everybody's ration and water tins were almost gone. Every day, folks peered up the line for the carts, but no carts came. Bi was getting desperate. No cookpot, no Pretty, and now no carts!

"Gap, I'm getting hungry," he said to no one in particular. He'd been talking to himself a lot; lately, now that the Pretty was gone. Why didn't she hurry up with her birthing and catch up so he could have the cookpot and some fun again? Where were them gappy carts? Bi spread out his roll and got ready for the night. It was cold, with no way to cook tea.

Both moons were up tonight, and nearly full. They shone through the thin fog, lighting up the flat plane. The fog was so thin and the moons so bright that Bi thought he could actually see the Other Line, way off in the distance. Did they have carts? Nobody knew.

Bi was thinking like that and drifting into sleep, while absently relieving

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himself, when he heard a tiny noise. Was it her? He looked up startled. No, it was some triple-ugly kid from the family group up ahead, messing with Bi's ration tin!

Bi got the knife out of his pouch and jumped up and grabbed the kid by the hair, shaking him and threatening with the knife. "Gappy thief!" he bellowed.

The kid screamed, and his family group woke up and began to threaten and fuss, but Bi had the knife pointed right at the kid. So they didn't dare come close.

"This kid tried to thieve my ration," yelled Bi. "I have the right to kill him, that's for sure. Kill him and eat his eyeballs, if I want, and you can't touch me, 'cause I caught him thieving. I'll tell you what, though," said Bi, with a very shrewd grin, "I'm not an ugly. I can see the kid is hungry like everyone else. I don't want bad feeling with my neighbors. I'll let the kid go, if he promises not to thieve again and if you'll give me a little cookpot full of ration and water. I lost my cookpot a ways back, when my Pretty was birthing. I'll let this thieving kid go, in return for a cookpot full of ration and water. How about it? Otherwise I'll kill him and eat his balls."

The family wailed and fussed, but pretty soon they handed over the filled pot. The kid got a real thrashing from his Ma, for trying to thieve, and Bi had the best, biggest meal of hot ration and bush tea. That night he slept warm and comfortable, and full, with no dreams at all.

It was his last good meal for a long, long time. The carts disappeared like a morning fog. Folks were lying along the line, too weak to move, their lips cracked and dry, their faces bony like skeletons, their eyes staring blankly in front of them. Lots of folks, especially the little babies, just didn't make it. They just didn't get up anymore.

It was the water part that was worst for Bi. His body was young and sturdy and could go without much ration for a long time. But water was different. His tongue felt like a dry flap of robe inside his mouth. There was just a little bit of scummy water inside his tin. Bi took a sip every now and then, but it didn't really help. He felt weak and dizzy, shivering even during the warm daytime. He began to forage at night for the little critters. Sometimes he could catch one with his knife. That helped some, even though they tasted real bad, but it didn't relieve his thirst. If water didn't come soon, he'd be one of the folks who didn't get up.

He figured it was time to drift and jump ahead. The ration got better, the further you went up the line, that was sure. Maybe the carts were stuck somewhere up ahead. Maybe he could keep going up the line until he could find the carts, or someone who knew about the carts, or something. He couldn't stay there, that was sure.

Lucky, just as he was making this plan, there was a half day of water fall-

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ing from the sky. This happened once in a while, that Bi could remember. The fog would get real thick and dark and rumbly, and water would actually fall from the sky in thick drops. Good, sweet water. This perked everyone up for a while, and Bi managed to get half a tin full of water and drink his fill for the first time in weeks. But then the dark water fog went away, and the light fog and sunshine returned. Still no carts. Bi was feeling stronger now and ready to get started on another drift up the line.

The line was a sorry sight. No big, strong family groups, waiting to grab and kill a drifter. Nobody even *cared* about drifters anymore, or their place in line, or anything. Groups of bodies just lying there in their rolls, staring vacantly into the fog. Bi moved steadily and weakly ahead, living off an occasional sip of his precious water and an occasional little critter, feeling sick and weak and wanting to lie down on his roll, like the others, but knowing it would be the end.

The line went on and on. He never knew how long it was! The land changed a little. Instead of flat bush, there were some low, scrubby trees, and the critters sounded a little different. Then, all of a sudden, there they were, the carts! But something was wrong, really *wrong*, because the cart pullers were just lying around, too. And there was no familiar rumble from inside the carts. The carts were dead. Bi walked boldly up and pressed one of the ration levers. Nothing happened. No one tried to stop him, they were all too weak, and the carts were dead, anyway.

With a frustrated yell, Bi lunged at the cart with his hands and fists and knees and feet. There must be ration and water in there, somewhere, there must! Sobbing and panting, he tore at the old rusty side of the cart, and, all of a sudden, he felt something give. A great piece of metal came away in his hands, leaving a jagged, bloody tear in his palm. But Bi didn't care. He was deep in the innards of the cart, tearing and pushing and poking and kicking. He pulled on a big, fleshy pipe, which gave way, and suddenly old, smelly, rotten ration was pouring down on his face, foul and inedible. He pulled at another pipe and found what he needed. *Water.* Warm, scummy, tinny, foul-tasting, but still drinkable water. Bi drank and drank, and filled his tin and drank some more. The cart pullers and others nearby were also rousing themselves to drink from the broken pipe, until the cart finally ran dry. Other folks, catching the idea, broke into the other carts until they finally found one with ration that hadn't gone putrid.

Bi pushed his way through the crowd to suck at the pipe and fill his tin, until other desperate bodies forced him away. Then he took his newly filled stomach and tins a little ways from the line, and clutching at the tins, he fell into an almost comatose sleep.

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When he awoke, he realized that he just had to keep going up the line, no reason to try to jump a place, with the carts dead and all. But this trip up the line was a real short one. Carefully hoarding his precious water and ration, he walked for about three days, and suddenly he came to the prettiest sight he ever saw.

All of a sudden, there was a big wall, running along the plain, as far as you could see. It was brightly colored, with wonderful pictures all over it, of bush flowers and folks and big suns and moons and stars. Behind the wall you could see trees, big ones, not just scrubby bush. And there were big, fleshy fruits, red and orange and yellow hanging from the trees. And under the trees, you could see tents, nice ones with bright stripes all over them. And you could hear loud, wonderful music, nicer than the sound of sky-critters. The smell of fresh-cooked ration filled the air and made Bi's mouth water, hungrily.

In the middle, behind the wall was a great round tent top, and, underneath, Bi could see different kinds of critters, all with beautiful bright colors, going round and round, under the tent top, and going up and down, in time to the music. Bi could see happy, laughing folks, in shiny new robes, riding on these colorful critters, going round and round, up and down, and chewing great gobs of crispy hot ration, while the music played so sweet.

The line went right up to an opening in the wall, where a man sat, dressed in a bright red robe, with a big white beard. Bi never saw anything like this in his whole life! He didn't have near enough words to describe the wondrous things that could be glimpsed inside that wall.

The folks in the line were all staring in wonderment. They never saw anything like this, neither. Old Mas were fishing into their pouches for little bits of metal, which they gave to the man in the red robe. He looked at the bits of metal carefully, counted them, and counted the folks in the family group, then looked at them, very carefully, wrote something down in a great big book, said something to the Ma and the family group, and finally, when that was all done, he opened the wall for them, and they went inside, dazed and smiling at the luck and wonder of it all.

Bi quickly jumped a place, a little ways down the line. He was real used to doing it now, and the folks at this end were too excited to fuss about a solo jumper. In a few hours, he was standing in front of the man, who had smiling, friendly blue eyes, near hidden by his bushy white beard.

"Welcome!" smiled the man, "just let me have your token, and you can go right in."

"My what?"

"Your token for admission."

"I don't have none. Nobody ever told me about it."

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"Where's your Ma?"

"Down the line. I'm solo now."

"Didn't your Ma give you your ration card when you went solo?"

"Yeah, sort of."

"And didn't she give you the token? Your Ma is supposed to keep everybody's token in her pouch."

"Gap, no, she must've forgot!"

"Ho, ho, that sure is a pity. You came all the way up the line and don't have no token to get in. I can't let no one in without a token. You'll have to get one."

"Where?"

"In the Other Line. You ever see that other line, way off thataway? That's the line where folks get their tokens. You gotta go to the end of the Other Line and wait your turn. They'll let you use your same ration card there, and that line moves pretty fast. Then you can get back in this line and wait your turn to get in."

"But that'll take a real long time, and it's dangerous!"

"Yeah, lucky you're so young."

"And there's no more ration carts along the line."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Sure is a pity, folks coming in real hungry and weak. Heading straight for the eats, don't even care about having no fun. But I heard that the Other Line still has carts. So you don't have to worry. By the time you're back in this line, the carts will most likely be fixed."

"I guess that's how it is," said Bi.

"Yep, that's how it is. Go along now and get that token."

Bi wandered away from the opening in the wall and thought about what to do. The wall was too high and smooth to climb over, that was sure, and there was no way he could get past that man in the red robe, 'cause he kept watch all the time. Bi knew he didn't want to cross the bush to get his token in the Other Line. It would take so long, and he didn't have near enough ration.

Somehow, he wanted to get inside that wall — soon as possible. It looked so pretty inside, prettiest thing he ever saw, except for his own Pretty. That place and that girl both filled him with the same sort of wantin' feeling. Funny, he hadn't thought about her for a while, he'd been so busy drifting. He liked pretty things a whole lot, that was sure.

So he figured the best thing to do would be to go back along the line and find his Pretty. Then him and her could go back along the line to find their old Mas and thieve their tokens. Then they'd drift back up to the wall and get inside and stay there, eating hot crisp ration every day and riding on them brightly colored critters under the tent — round and round, up and down, listening to the music and munching ration, every day! Wait till she saw it, her eyes would gleam, for sure.

Yeah, that's what Bi would do. He'd find his Pretty, get his token, and get inside that wall. And, for sure, she must be done birthing, by now.

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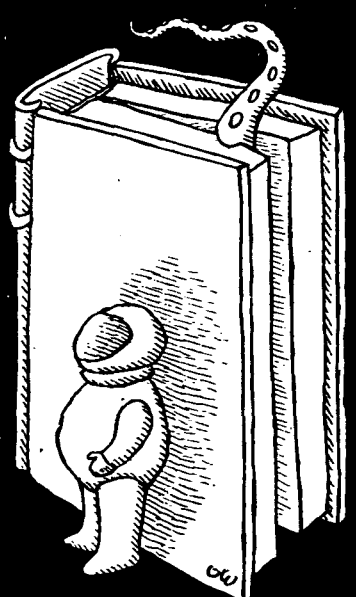
Books

GEORGE ZEBROWSKI



The Chain of Chance by Stanisław Lem, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, $7.95 Cloth, 1978 Paper, HBJ/Jove

The Uncertainty Principle by Dmitri Bilenkin, Macmillan, 1978, $7.95 Cloth, $1.95 Paper

Roadside Picnic & Tale of the Troika by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Macmillan, 1977, $8.95 Cloth, $1.95 Pocket Books, 1978

Noon: 22nd Century by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Macmillan, 1978, $10.95 Cloth, $2.45 Paper

Prisoners of Power by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Macmillan, 1977, Cloth, $9.95, Paper, $2.45

World Soul by Mikhail Emtsev and Eremei Parnov, Macmillan, 1978, $7.95 Cloth

Definitely Maybe by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Macmillan, 1978, $7.95 Cloth, $1.95 Paper

Half a Life by Kirill Bulychev, Macmillan, 1977, $7.95 Cloth

A Perfect Vacuum by Stanisław Lem, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book, $8.95 Cloth, 1979

As anticipated in my last column (F&SF, August 1977), the publishing of non-English SF has increased, spearheaded by Macmillan's highly successful *Best Soviet SF* series, edited by Roger DeGaris. Stanisław Lem, meanwhile, has changed publishers, replacing Seabury Press with Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, under the prestigious Helen and Kurt Wolff Books imprint,

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where the plan is to publish Lem's entire body of work, in both his many fictional and non-fictional modes. No writer could ask for more distinguished support than to appear in these two programs, both from an editorial view and in the manner of publication. A number of authors have complained about this favored treatment of "foreigners," but their reaction only serves to point up the often cheap, sensational manner in which SF is published in the West. We have our serious presentations, but too often the packaging bears little correspondence to the quality of the work, in soft or hardcover.

The Chain of Chance is a rational variant of *The Investigation*, Lem has told us in a recent interview, because the major problem is solved at the end. The novel shares with *Solaris* the ambiguity of getting at an elusive truth. An American ex-astronaut investigates the deaths of eleven men in an Italian resort by duplicating all the circumstances preceding their deaths, with himself as guinea pig. What makes this a fascinating, though low-keyed suspense story, is the way it prods our minds to glimpse some kind of pattern in the various deaths, much in the same way that astronomers of the last century "saw" the canals of Mars in the broken lines and patchy fragments of their telescopic images. Although this is not a science fiction story in the obvious sense, it is science-fictional in the Fortean sense. The novel is about probability, causality, random-quantum views of the universe, the nature of the unknown as it comes into collision with an inquiring human being; as such the book widens the scope of the SF novel, by bringing into the here-and-now the mysterious aspects of the universe around us, by finding the unknown in the ordinary.

Specifically, the story deals with "emergent" events of the kind that are not predictable, though explainable after the fact. Synergetic effects of this kind are the source of all that is novel in the universe, when various elements come together to create new wholes. Without giving away the ending, I can say that in this one Lem finds an answer to his central mystery (pace Charles Fort); it is not an answer that the wish-fulfillers and power-fantasists of science fiction will take to heart, but it is an answer that faces the realities of the limits of human life and civilization. The only complaint I have about this sleek, subtle book, is that the character of the American astronaut is not convincing; he is a very believable human being, but a European, not an American. Discerning readers might like to compare Lem's astronaut to the one in Benford's *In the Ocean of Night*, and to Barry Malzberg's various astronauts.

A Perfect Vacuum is a book of reviews of non-existent books. The last review is a review of the entire volume. It has been said that very good books might be written from these plots and materials. Lem is always difficult to

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assess, since his work reaches us in English from his different periods, through the "slow glass" of translation, or like starlight from different distances. Where is he now? This is a curious, funny, and infuriating book. Infuriating because its targets are cherished by many of us, and because Lem should have written some of the books presented in these imaginary reviews. Why didn't Lem write them? Is he spoofing the make-work approach to literature? Make up your own mind, but even though this kind of work may be a dead end for a writer of fiction, I'm glad that it was written; perhaps it's a watershed from which new fiction will emerge. Whatever we call this book, it's a stimulating, astonishingly original exhibition. *The Chain of Chance* is well translated by Louis Iribarne. *A Perfect Vacuum* has been finely wrought into English by Michael Kandel.

Dmitri Bilenkin's *The Uncertainty Principle* shows us a skilled and readable writer, the kind of enterprising craftsman who could make a story out of just about anything. Take the notion of a man flying across a road ... well, that one is here also ("Things Like that Don't Happen"). I wish that the author had been more selective in his choice of materials. Too many of these stories are smooth exercises, remarkably short, often filled with flashes of insight into human life and the limits of human knowledge.

In the title story we have the equivalent of the Wellsian time traveller saving Weena. "Modernized Hell" has the hero beating the devil through bureaucracy; "The Ban" is a "man is not wise enough to know" warning. This and "Final Exam" are very obvious stories. "What Never Was," however, is a touching story about a mentally ill man who comes to prefer, and rightly, the dream environment that has helped cure him. "Finger of Fate" is a disappointing O. Henry exercise; "Intelligence Test" is about a first contact with alien metamorphs, and a puzzle story to rank with early Clement. "Nothing But Ice" is an ambiguous story about the beauty of alien worlds, while "Snows of Olympus" preaches about the universality of the mountain climbing urge for all intelligent beings (Mars is the setting), and ends with an interstellar "Kilroy was here" surprise. Very telegraphed.

"Dusty Path" is a good story about man's kinship with the animals, and well worth reading and thinking about; but "The Painter" is an obvious variation of the dying nature theme in the Simak manner. "Stranger's Eyes" is another Clement-like problem story about an expedition whose arrival on a far planet destroys a precarious adaptive balance of life, with tragic results. The very act of observation changes the things observed. A first rate adaptation of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle from physics to biology and alien ecology.

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Although Bilenkin shows skill and development over the span of these 18 stories, his deftness in developing setting, situation and character is strained by the brevity of the tales. Most are under 4000 words, none over 5000 words. What surprised me was that I kept reading one after the other. The single outstanding story is "The Man Who Was Present," about a man whose presence somehow stimulates creative activity in others — not by conversation but by simple, silent presence. It alone is worth the price of the book, and deserves to be remembered. In the future, Bilenkin should try to be less professional and more ambitious.

In the short time since its publication in English, *Roadside Picnic* has established itself as an important novel. It won 2nd place in the John W. Campbell Memorial competition, as well as receiving unanimous praise from critics and reviewers. The story deals with the effects of an alien visit to earth. The visitors leave behind various artifacts, their equivalent of picnic junk, which are collected from the contaminated areas by "stalkers" — people who have become experienced in the ways of this area. The hunting trips through this alien refuse area are fascinating. The effect of the unknown on the lives of the stalkers, scientists and townspeople is moving, often heartbreaking. What makes the story work are the human reactions and relationships, the sudden details that startle the reader but are part of the normal world of the story. The characters *accept* their world with all its changes, and so do we.

At one point a character speculates on the notion of reason as an explicit form of instinct, through which we approach and assimilate the unknown. It occurred to me as I was reading that the stalkers are much like science fiction writers, and that some bring back the genuine unknown, while others fake it, or bring back trivia. It's an adult, literate, mercilessly honest book — the kind of story that *Astounding* might have published if there had been no taboos on language and sex. The sense of human hurt is devastating.

Tale of the Troika, the companion novel in this bargain volume, is almost as good, but in a completely different vein. Not since Eric Frank Russell was at the height of his powers have I found so much laughter in a science fiction story. This one is extremely intricate, and probably impossible to get in one reading, unless you go very slowly. It's a combination of the Marx Brothers and screwy fairy tales and science fiction. There are many wonderful cameo appearances by strange creatures, aliens, bureaucrats, biological chimeras, etc. The settings are astonishingly implausible, yet treated with complete acceptance. I don't think I should try to describe this story.

"Never in sf have I ever come across such an extreme example of contempt for humanity as in this book,"

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Lem has said of *Roadside Picnic* (in his FOUNDATION interview, issue 15, January 1979), where 'visitors' treat humankind like parasites or noxious insects." He might have had a better case if he had cited Disch's *The Genocides*. *Roadside Picnic* treats human hopes and aspirations in a very sympathetic way. The aliens are more indifferent than contemptuous. They are never brought on stage, and the central image of the book is that they simply left their picnic garbage on earth, much as we might forget a flashlight or children's toys. Lem makes a valid point about *Tale of the Troika*, however, when he questions the story's ability to find satiric targets in the United States. He points out, interestingly, that the story is far more realistic about the Soviet situation than many Western readers might think unless they had experienced many Soviet local situations at first hand. Lem also notes that many of the Strugatskys's books are polemical responses to Lem's work. The thing to note is that the Strugatskys's approach to writing differs markedly from that of Lem. They share an approach with him, and with other Europeans (as far back as Capek), in refusing to separate SF from the rest of literature in its approach to universal problems of human life and destiny.

Noon: 22nd Century is unlike any Strugatsky book I've seen to date. Its technique reminds me of Dos Passos, but on the scale of the solar system and beyond. One reads this book for the recurring characters, and for the gradual portrait of the future that emerges through the accretion of details, stories and settings. Many of the details are very winning, and I found quite a few of the short sequences very moving, the human beings quite appealing. The contrasts with our own times made me feel quaint. Inevitably, this kind of novel will not be to everyone's liking, but the authors have used the technique well, if not always successfully.

Definitely Maybe is an intriguing novel of confrontation with the unknown, along Lem-like lines. I think the book was grossly underrated by F&SF's previous reviewer, as well as misunderstood. Since the book is now out in paper, and has been highly praised by countless others. I recommend that the F&SF reader make up his or her own mind.

Prisoners of Power is a strong novel dealing with intervention in the affairs of a declining culture on another planet. We are reminded of *Hard to Be A God* by the same authors. Maxim's future world is unlike ours, but the planet he visits is more like our earth, giving us a double view — one from the past and one from the future.

The great virtues of *Prisoners of Power* lie in its treatment of the central problem: should a backward society be moved forward or left alone. We see this in the way that Maxim changes and hardens through his many adventures, and in the end we are also exhausted, changed.

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Two other Strugatsky novels, not published in the Macmillan series, are *The Final Circle of Paradise* (DAW 218), *Monday Begins On Saturday* (DAW 265). This second novel is billed as "a strictly *unauthorized* translation!" What does this mean? That the book has been pirated? I thought we now had an agreement with the Soviets.

World Soul deals with the stripping away of the psychic walls between individuals. Telepathy links all of humanity, giving rise to a world soul, an emergent, collective being whose interests are not those of civilizations as we know it. This is a philosophically sophisticated novel which suggests that excessive empathy and telepathy will necessarily destroy the kind of beings that we are; that being separate in the way that we are, especially in matters of love, produces all that is angular and individual. A Stapledonian idea is here brought down to individual focus, and worked out with complete logic and human believability, as well as with a sense of the future. The "biotosis," or World Soul, is one of SF's most inspired creations.

Half A Life is the author's first collection of stories in English. Some of you will remember the author's visit to the US a couple of years ago. A youngish, bearded man who might have been mistaken for an earlier version of Frank Herbert, he charmed the SFWA Nebula Awards gathering in New York with a wonderfully witty and idiomatically correct speech in English. Besides writing SF, he is a specialist in Southeast Asia at the Oriental Institute in Moscow. He was the first SF writer from the Soviet Union to visit the United States.

The stories in this volume have a great sense of immediacy, even when set on an alien planet (as in "Red Deer, White Deer"). In the title story, a very well drawn Russian heroine is kidnapped by aliens as a specimen, and teams up with other captives to gain her freedom. It's a long, polished story — the best in the book — that should have been an award contender, if those who read and nominate had bothered to look beyond their ethnocentric noses.

What can we say about all these books as a whole, beyond commenting on their high quality and entertainment value? One reason that the quality is so high is because they were culled from a larger body of work; doubtless the Soviets have their share of bad SF. We must not fall into the trap of believing that foreign language SF is uniformly superior to that of other countries (yes, there is foreign language SF outside of Poland and Russia — and I don't mean France only. See *Travelling Toward Epsilon* edited by Maxim Jakubowski, a good volume of French SF. There's a very informative introduction). Certainly, a careful Western reader might find many reflections of Soviet culture in these books (both

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Lem and the Strugatskys are not the darlings of their governments, as one major American SF writer claimed about Lem, in a feeble effort to explain Lem's critical views of American SF as an attempt by Lem to garner favor with authorities). I'm more interested in saying what these books have to say to Western readers and to Western SF writers. What do they say about SF?

What emerges from reading these books is a sense of human life *as it is lived now* coming to grips with the future and with the fantastic. The authors do not treat their materials as a game to be played. The works are filled with observations of ordinary life, with knowing and feeling; the works satisfy in a way that most science fiction does not, because it is a game for the immature, a genre entertainment that is not curious about how people feel and think, because it lacks the authenticity of lived experience. Science fiction, as Bester once put it, breaks down precisely at the point where it fails to make a contribution to the study of man. I'll go further and say that it doesn't even incorporate second-hand, borrowed contributions to the understanding of humanity. Most SF ideas are hand-me-downs from other writers, not from genuine creative sources. It is hard to wrest an idea for an original story from a genuine source in some discipline — that's why we take most everything from the innovators — Wells, Stapledon, and others who have done all the hard work for us. By taking from them, however, we pay the price of cutting ourselves off from new and interesting human problems, from the science fiction that should be. We forfeit any chance of being prophetic about human responses to futurity. Writers who have come up against the difficulty of integrating human experience with original content, very often cop out by declaring an end to "realistic SF" and calling their work fantasy whenever their verisimilitude breaks down. (Good fantasy, of course, has its own discipline).

These books also prompt one to consider the nature of fiction, since SF seems so often to strain the nature of fictional technique. Is fiction, as many insist, the structuring of feelings, actions and colorful images? Must novels, to be good, be quick and full of overt conflict and action? Is fiction a poor man's movies, as one prominent author has recently claimed in a long series of articles (movies that come into the mind through the single channel of words)?

I would like to live with a heterogeneous approach to fiction, especially to SF, with the community of writers and critics tolerating differences and the pursuit of untried paths, rather than attributing them to the author's inability. I would like stories to be entertaining and a challenge to thought, to paraphrase Poul Anderson. I want to see true human life and civilization. I want to see works where the reader knows when to slow down for

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thought, for what the impatient decry as exposition, talk and heavy concerns. Thomas Mann would not have made it in SF, I fear.

Fiction should not be a wind that rushes through the reader's head. Fiction should be more than cool surface and speed born on the first draft, hiding a hollow center. I would like readers to think of a story or book as something that they will perform in their minds, in the way that a conductor brings a musical score to life, without simply expecting it to move them with no effort. And most importantly, readers should come to recognize when they are not ready to read a particular work, that it may change for them as they grow older and more experienced. Ultimately, SF would be written by people who know the universe of human culture, knowledge and life, and then write science fiction, not by genre specialists.

Is it so hard to state what good fiction is all about? Good fiction, drama, is a way of knowing life, ourselves, not in the form that experience confronts us with it, but in the form of exploration, justification, illumination, understanding, insight, observation from different angles, appreciation of beauty. SF should be about life as it might be, anchored in the past but flowing into the future, plastic under the pressure of new circumstances. A science fiction of this kind cannot deal in the sensational alone; it must light its way with the lamp of intellect.

Stanley G. Weinbaum once complained about SF thus: "...most of our writers fail to take advantage of science fiction's one grand opportunity — its critical possibilities..." He continues for about a page, but then, fearful that he's talking seriously to the wrong audience, he quickly pays homage to the god of popular taste: "Or anyway, that's my opinion, and it won't make a bit of difference to those readers (if any) who've plowed thru to this point. The younger writers will stand by their guns — or purple rays — and the younger readers will take as much delight as ever in super-scientists, Earth-Mars wars, ant-men, tractor rays, and heroes who save country, earth, solar system, or universe from the terrible invaders from Outside. More power to 'em. I'd like to experience those same thrills again myself." (Preface to *A Martian Odyssey*, The Collected Short Stories, Hyperion Press, 1974).

Times have changed since Weinbaum's death. He never lived to see the better SF that we see him glimpsing in the above lines, as he ironically accepts that SF is a childish literature, one whose pleasure he cannot easily recapture.

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Here is another story in Phyllis Eisenstein's vastly entertaining series about a telekinetic minstrel named Alaric; the last story here was "The Land of Sorrow," September 1977. The earlier stories have been collected in book form by Arkham House under the title BORN TO EXILE (reviewed in Books, *March 1979).*

The Mountain Fastness

BY

PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

From his resting place deep in the mountains, Alaric could not see the valley of the Red Lord. Yet behind his eyes, its image lingered: thatched huts huddled like frightened sheep in the wide fields, the great stone fortress loomed like a vulture over the river, the Red Lord himself clothed in the color of blood and striding through his peasants' lives like a god. And the high tower, most sharply etched image of all, where the Red Lord tortured people to death to satisfy the dark cravings of his heart. Alaric shivered, though the campfire crackled bright at his feet. Beside him, his unsheathed sword glinted in the flamelight. A mere wish could take him back to the castle, to a silent search and a silent execution.

Am I to begin righting the wrongs of the world, Dall? he asked of his beloved mentor's memory. He could have flitted to the grave in an instant, stood above it to contemplate the pattern of grasses on its mounded surface, but that pattern would yield no answer. Dall had never killed another human being; in this, as in so many things, Alaric had surpassed his old friend.

He lay back against a tree. Supper had long since been served in the Red Lord's stronghold, and the scraps of the meal tossed to quarreling dogs. The courtyard would be quiet now, a few men-at-arms standing the weary watch till dawn. Alaric had not been inside the hall so late, but he was sure that only a handful of guards stirred there, too, and probably one or two more at the door of the lord's own chamber. This moment would be perfect for the killing, if only he knew where that chamber lay. But he did not; and so he waited, dozing by the fire, as he had waited for two days already, for the

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opportunity to do the deed.

And for the courage.

He was not a warrior. All his life he had run away from danger. If the sword had not been a keepsake, he would have sold it long since, passed it on to some hands that had a use for a fine-forged blade. But it was a treasure to him, last remnant of lost days of love and laughter. He could heft it with some grace because those had also been days of mock battle in the summer sun, wooden weapons clashing, sweat soaking the quilted armor that protected his flesh. The blade had drawn blood only once, in giving the ease of death to a suffering woman, never in anger. Nor was it anger that Alaric felt now, only a cold loathing, as for a venomous spider. That loathing kept him in the mountains that ringed the Red Lord's valley when he could be lazing on a warm hearth singing songs of love, but it was not quite a strong enough emotion to carry him all the way back to the fortress.

He was not a warrior, but he was one man who could do the deed and escape with his life.

He wondered if the Red Lord had found another victim yet to shackle in his tower. In that tiny prison room, he might be killed, with only a pair of armed men and a helpless peasant to watch. Alaric's hand closed on the pommel of his sword. He would have to be quicker than ever before, to strike before the guards could recover from their surprise. His arms remembered the feel of the blade plunging through human flesh and bone. His fingers shook, though he gripped the sword with whitened knuckles. *Tomorrow*, he thought. *Tomorrow*. He slid the blade into its scabbard, then kicked dirt over the fire and curled up in his cloak. Sleep was long in claiming him.

He awoke to a foot prodding his shoulder. A man stood over him, a heavy staff in his hands, its charred and sharpened end pointing at Alaric.

Alaric smiled. "Good morn," he said.

The man grunted. He wore the ragged remains of a linen shirt and trews, with a goatskin pulled over his shoulders as a cloak. His feet were bare and horny, the nails dirty and overgrown like animal claws. He gestured peremptorily with the staff. "Get up."

Alaric obliged him slowly. He made no attempt to touch the sword, seeing the man's eyes flicker in that direction. "My name is Alaric," he said, "and I am a minstrel. See, over there, that bundle contains my lute. I'll play it for you, if you like."

The man scraped the sword toward himself with one foot, then picked it up with his left hand, cradling the staff in his right like a knight couching a lance for the charge. "A pretty piece of weaponry you have here, minstrel," he said, and he smiled, showing a mouth that was missing three teeth. "And you asked to use it, too, by burning wood most of the night on this mountain."

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"It was a very small fire," said Alaric, "and I didn't think anyone lived in this wilderness to see it."

"Oh, we live here, if you want to call it a life. We live here." He made a sharp motion with the sword, and if the blade had not been sheathed, Alaric would have flinched, so close did it come to his belly. "Throw that knife down and step back from it."

Alaric did as he said, and the man scooped the knife up with two fingers of the hand that held the sword.

"Are you a bandit?" the minstrel asked.

His captor laughed. "Oh, yes, we are bandits. We plunder and live a soft life up here in the mountains." He jerked his head toward his right shoulder. "Come along, minstrel. You can entertain at our bandit feast."

"I'll need my lute for that."

"Well, then, bring it. But mark you show me it's nothing more than a lute before we take another step."

Alaric unwrapped the instrument slowly, and when the man was satisfied with its identity, he wrapped it up again, to protect it from the morning damp. His knapsack contained no more than a change of clothing; his captor passed it with a glance, and Alaric slung both bundles over his shoulder. He started walking.

They took no path, for there was none, not even a goat trail. Underfoot were stones rimmed with tough grass, slippery with dew. The second time he fell, Alaric would have stopped to nurse his battered shins, but the sharp end of the staff urged him onward.

"Up there," said the man, pointing to a boulder-strewn incline.

A depression, relatively free of obstructions, followed the base of the rise and curved around it in the distance. "Can't we go that way?" asked Alaric.

"Climb."

The minstrel could have reached the top of the slope in an eyeblink with his power, but so long as another human being watched, he dared not. Instead, panting, he clutched at the rocks with fingers scraped raw and climbed. His captor moved beside him, still carrying staff and sword; he seemed not to need his hands for the ascent at all. They made slow, steady progress, and Alaric began to wonder what they would see at the summit.

He never found out. Well below the top, hidden from the view of anyone beneath by a broad ledge, was the entrance of a cave. Alaric and his captor squeezed through the narrow opening. Inside was darkness and a rank smell.

As his eyes became accustomed to the feeble illumination from behind him, Alaric was able to pick out nearby human figures. He also became aware of the walls and ceiling — the space around him was scarcely more than a pocket in the mountainside, and a few bodies filled it up. The smell, he realized, was that of their unwashed flesh.

"Here he is," said his captor.

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"Does he have food?" asked a woman.

"No. He had food yesterday, but he ate it all."

The woman keened softly. "How can he travel without food?"

"He is a fool," said Alaric's captor.

"I planned to hunt," said Alaric.

"You *are* a fool," said another woman. "There's nothing to hunt in these mountains."

"There are wild goats," said Alaric.

"Goats!" said a man. "Shall we turn him loose and watch him hunt the goats of these mountains!"

"Let's eat him," said the first woman. At her words, a hush fell over the crowd, not even the shuffle of feet marring it.

Alaric edged sideways till rock was at his back and he was no longer silhouetted against the entrance. "I can find you food," he said, "if you're hungry. If you eat me, you won't have the benefit of my services, nor my music."

"My baby is hungry," said the woman. "I can't give milk without food."

"The stranger says he can find us food," said the other woman. "Where?"

"A secret place," replied Alaric.

"The valley," said the woman who spoke of her baby. "He'll bring the Red Lord's men to hunt us down."

"Nearer than the valley," said Alaric.

"Show me," said his captor.

"I can't do that. You must trust me."

"We trust no one."

"Swear on your mother's grave that you will not harm me," said Alaric, "and I will swear on mine that I'll not bring you harm."

"As if such swearing would mean anything to the Red Lord!"

"I am not the Red Lord's man. I am not of the valley at all."

"You could have come to the valley since the last of us left. You could be his man ... though I can't recall that he ever let an outlander live before."

"He's done it now!" cried the woman. "To deceive us!"

"Let me leave," said Alaric, "and I'll return before the sun marks noon. I couldn't travel to the valley and back in that short time."

"He has the Red Lord's men hidden in our mountains!" wailed the woman.

"Hush, Malgis," said the second woman. "We would know if they were in our mountains."

"I'll leave you my lute as ransom," said Alaric. "My sword, my cloak, all ... but you must give me back my knife."

"He hunts with a knife," muttered one of the men.

"I have my methods. I promise you, you will not regret giving me my freedom."

His captor, having dropped the staff, the sword, and the knife in other hands, stepped close to Alaric and gripped the minstrel's shoulders with strong fingers. He turned Alaric's face to the light of the entrance and gazed at

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it long. "I brought you here because I thought you were the Red Lord's spy. You were too close to this meeting place. You didn't move on with yesterday morning, as any traveler would. But if it be true that you are nothing but a minstrel, that you aren't of the valley, then I have saved your life this day; for if you had gone on to the valley, you would surely be on the road to death right now. The Red Lord greets travelers most unpleasantly, minstrel, this I promise you."

"I know," said Alaric. "I have been to the valley, I have seen and heard terrible things, and I have narrowly missed the fate you are thinking of. I have no love for the Red Lord, believe me. And if you will conquer your fear of me, I can help you, I swear it."

"Why were you lying so long at your campfire, then, minstrel?"

"I was thinking of how I might kill him."

The gasp of the crowd sounded like a sudden gust of wind through the entrance to the cave.

"You *are* a fool," said one of the men.

"Possibly," said Alaric. "I wasn't quite sure that I would try it. Now I'll put off the decision while I find you food."

His captor let his shoulders loose. "Go," he said. "Bring the food back here before noon. We will not be here when you return, but we will see you. And if you should prove something other than a minstrel who owes no allegiance to the Red Lord, you will never see any of us again."

Alaric squeezed through the cave entrance. Outside, balancing on the ledge that hid the opening from below, he turned back. Darkness lay behind him, and he could see nothing inside now that his eyes were narrowed by sunlight. He said, "Who are you folk?"

His captor answered. "The Red Lord wanted each of us, and we cheated him. We are the exiles of the valley."

Alaric nodded and started down the mountainside. The descent was more treacherous than the climb had been, but shorter, because he did not intend to reach the bottom. He angled toward an outcropping of rock below and to one side of the cave entrance; behind it, he could not be seen from the opening. He vanished.

Many days' journey south was a dense wood where game was plentiful and scarcely knew the fear of man. Alaric hunted there when he could find no easier source of food, either in manor house or peasant hut. Among the trees was a clear brook where deer drank in the morning; he went to it, appearing some distance from the verge. No animals were within sight; so he settled down to wait, leafy bushes cloaking his body, wind blowing his scent away from the water. A short time passed before a doe peered out of the greenery on the far side of the stream. Alaric held himself immobile while she edged toward the flowing

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water, head turning from side to side as she sought signs of danger. At last she bent to drink. Alaric was beside her in an instant, and before she could startle he had plunged his knife into her throat, hooked an arm about her neck, and wrestled her to the ground. Their strengths were evenly matched, for the doe weighed near as much as he did, but hers ebbed fast with her life's blood. When she stopped struggling, he hefted the carcass across his shoulders and returned to the mountains.

He appeared a short walk from his campsite of the previous night, in a place he hoped none of the exiles would have reason to be watching. The spot seemed deserted. He dropped the deer and then wriggled his back and shoulders, which had been creaking under the heavy weight. After catching his breath, he bent to the task of skinning and dressing out the animal.

Some time later, just as the sun was reaching its zenith, he arrived at the bottom of the slope that led to the cave. He had walked there, using the same route that his captor had selected; though it was unmarked, he remembered every step of the way, as he always remembered such things. He had wrapped a forequarter of the deer in the skin, carrying it over his shoulder, and now he threw it down upon the rocks.

"Come get it, my friends!" he shouted. "I'm not going to climb with this load!" He sat down on a boulder to wait for them.

Noon passed, and no one came to him. "Don't tell me I've done this for nothing!" he said at last. He stood up, hands on hips, looking around in annoyance. "I haven't any army with me — surely you can see that by now! I thought you folk were hungry!"

At that, a woman peeped out from behind a clump of rocks halfway up the slope. Then she scrambled toward him, and he could see the small head that bobbed just beneath hers — her baby in a sling upon her bosom.

"Are you Malgis?" he asked.

She nodded and, laying hands on the venison forequarter, ripped a bloody chunk of meat away and crammed it into her mouth.

Alaric felt faintly disgusted at the sight. "It would taste better cooked," he said.

She cast him a wild glance but said nothing, just kept chewing. She was a sun- and wind-burned woman of middling years, so thin that her skin seemed to cling to bone alone, with no fat or sinew to soften the lines. Her hair was fair, though stringy with grease and dirt. Once, Alaric thought, she had been pretty.

The other exiles trickled out of their hiding places to converge on the meat, and they pushed and clawed at each other in their eagerness to reach it.

"There is more," Alaric said. "Not far from my campsite. I couldn't carry it all this far. If three or four of you will come along with me, I'll take you to it."

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"Where did you find this?" asked his captor.

Alaric shook his head. "That will have to be my secret, friend."

The man gripped Alaric's arm hard. "Where?"

"There is some game in these mountains," said Alaric, "but one must know where to seek it and how to hunt it." He stared down at the man's hand, then up into his face, and the man let go abruptly. "You have been here a long time. What have you lived on?"

"Roots and berries," mumbled Malgis, eating more slowly now and picking slivers of the raw meat from her teeth with broken, dirty fingernails.

"We have caught a few of the wild goats," said Alaric's captor, "but that isn't easy."

"And we have stolen from the valley," said one of the other men. "That isn't easy either."

Alaric looked around at them, his first clear view of the whole ragtag group. There were eleven in all. Smeared with blood from the raw venison, their clothing in tatters, their feet roughened and scarred from climbing along the crags, they hardly looked as if they had ever lived in comfortable huts and drunk summer wine. "You have been here," he said, "how long?"

"Since I was young and pretty," said Malgis.

"Different times for each of us," said Alaric's captor. "Some of us have lost track of the number of seasons."

They had done eating by now, and three of the men and one woman volunteered to accompany Alaric to retrieve the rest of the meat. On the way, they did not talk much, but they did give Alaric their names when he asked for them — the men were Daugas, Vitat, and Jogil, the woman Gedimina. And his captor, he learned, was called Berown. He had been in the mountains the longest of the group and had been their leader since an older man died of the cold the previous winter.

They divided the remaining meat among them, each man slinging a haunch over his shoulder and the woman carrying the deerskin — which they had brought back with them — full of the edible internal organs. Alaric took the head. When they returned to the others, the minstrel was relieved of his small burden by Berown, and the whole troop of exiles went off together, the empty-handed ones forming a tight knot about the meat bearers, like cows protecting their calves from marauding wolves. Only Daugas was left behind with Alaric, to keep him from following the others and discovering one of their secret places. In his hand, Daugas held a piece of deer liver that would serve as the minstrel's meal.

"You still don't trust me," Alaric remarked, "even now that I've filled your bellies." He shook his head. "Well, I hope you'll cook the venison next time — it tastes much better that way. I intend to cook mine."

"You have no fire," said Daugas.

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"There's wood a-plenty here. And I have flint and steel in my pack. I suppose it's still up *there.*" He indicated the slope and the cave with a wave of his hand.

Daugas nodded.

Sighing, Alaric began to climb. He was not as fresh as he had been in the morning, and Daugas had to help him. They found the pack and the lute in the cave, but — as Alaric had suspected — the sword was not there.

He built his fire in a sheltered spot, sliced the liver thin, and spread it on pointed sticks to sizzle over the flames. The rising aroma made him acutely aware that he had not eaten all day, and he pulled the first slice away from the heat when it was still rare. Daugas's eyes were so wide and so intent on the cooking meat that Alaric split the first slice with him.

"I thought you ate already," said the minstrel.

"It *is* better cooked," said Daugas.

Alaric looked at him thoughtfully. "You do have fire up here in the mountains, don't you?"

Daugas nodded. "Back at our camp, we keep a fire burning all the time. And Berown has flint and steel, in case it goes out." He licked his fingers. "I have never tasted anything so good."

"You've never had venison before?"

"No. There are some deer in the valley, but they belong to the Red Lord."

"Ah," said Alaric. "I can imagine what must happen to poachers."

Daugas looked down at the scrap of meat remaining in his hand. "Is this the Red Lord's deer?"

Alaric shrugged. "I didn't ask before I took it."

"Some of them are loose in the mountains, then." He shook his head slowly. "But they are swift creatures. How does a person hunt them?" He gazed expectantly at Alaric.

"One relies on surprise," said Alaric. "And considerable patience."

"The same way one hunts the goats," Daugas said glumly. "We are farmers, not hunters."

"Can you not farm in the mountains?"

Daugas sighed. "We raised a little barley last year — stunted stuff, though it fed us for a time. The soil is poor up here, not like the valley, and it is so very rocky." He kicked at some loose pebbles with his bare foot.

"I'm surprised you have stayed here so long," said Alaric.

"We can't go back." Daugas looked into the flames with weary eyes. "I have wanted to, many times since I came here. I have wanted to go back to my father and mother. I've been to the valley, to steal grain. I've passed the house where I was born. But I didn't dare go in. I think they would hide me, but that would only mean their doom as well as mine. The Red Lord would find us out."

"Why not go the other way, then?"

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"Other way?"

"Away from the valley. Away from the Red Lord forever."

"Away? But where?"

"South, to warmer climes. Or east or west. There is a wide world out there: You need not starve here."

Daugas shook his head. "The mountains are harsh traveling."

Alaric had to laugh. "You are hardy folk — hardier than I am, and I made the journey. And I have heard that merchants make it as well, whole caravans that pass through the valley on their way to the north. Surely if soft merchants from the south can manage the journey, so can you."

"And bandits," said Daugas.

"If there are bandits," said Alaric, "then the merchants manage to drive them off."

"Perhaps only the best armed caravans get through, minstrel."

"I saw no bandits in *my* journey."

"They *are* there. We are ringed by them, like a great wall around the valley, nine or ten days' journey outward. They are afraid of the Red Lord. So they rarely venture closer. Before his reign, though, they raided us often — I remember my grandfather speaking of those days. Everyone had to hide in the castle when the bandits came, and when they finally left, they took everything they could carry and burned the rest. The people had to rebuild their homes, replant their fields, and raise new livestock from animals they had taken into the castle with them."

"In your grandfather's day?"

"Yes. When the Red Lord became our ruler, things changed. When the bandits attacked, he and his men drove them off; they killed many and brought others back for torture. Now the bandits stay away, but still the Red Lord takes his men up into the mountains after them sometimes."

Alaric was puzzled. "How is it that the Red Lord could drive the bandits away and his predecessor could not?"

"His father kept only a small guard," said Daugas, "and ill-trained, so my grandfather said — no match for the bandits. But the Red Lord called in enough farmers' sons to make his army strong, and he trained them well. He is a great commander. Ask Berown of that if you wish; he was one of the Red Lord's men, until he fell asleep on watch."

"The Red Lord tells his people there are bandits in the mountains," said Alaric. "Have you *seen* these bandits in recent years?"

Daugas shook his head. "I was no soldier; I never hunted them."

"And Berown — does he say he has seen such bandits?"

"He helped bring them back to the castle for torture."

"But he has been here for many years, has he not?"

"Yes, many."

"Then ... perhaps there are no bandits any more. Perhaps they have all been hunted down. Or have given up and run away from the Red Lord."

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Daugas frowned. "Do we dare believe that?"

Alaric shrugged. "You folk have told me that the mountains make an inhospitable dwelling place. Without the valley to raid for food — as you do yourselves — how could bandits survive?"

Daugas appeared to turn that over in his mind. "I don't know," he said at last.

"Berown told me, though I think he meant it as a joke, that *you* were the bandits."

"We?"

"You have taken their place, have you not? You steal from the valley. You live in the mountains. And ... the Red Lord hunts you?"

"He does."

"Then how can you be afraid of yourselves?"

Daugas stood up. "I don't know what to think now. You argue smoothly — too smoothly, perhaps. We still don't know who you are."

"I am no more than I appear to be," said Alaric. Finished with the liver now, he wiped his fingers on a corner of his cloak and drew the lute out of its wrappings. "Shall I sing you a song, Daugas?"

"I don't care."

"Sit down. Take your ease. Or are you impatient to do something?"

"No."

"Not ... impatient to kill me?"

Daugas frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I thought you might have been left behind to get rid of the stranger."

"No."

"I'm glad I'm wrong, then. We're a near match, you and I. But you would not be able to kill me, Daugas. I hope you will remember that." He strummed a chord on the lute and then began a soft melody about a lost goat and the goatherd who hunted it in the high mountains. The child braved a snowstorm to search for the animal, only to find it slain by a wolf. The song ended with the goatherd facing the wolf with only an icy branch for a weapon, and the wolf's red eyes staring at him through the swirling snow.

"You sing very nicely," said Daugas, "but that is a strange ending to the story. It is no ending at all. What happens to the child?"

"What do you think happens?" asked Alaric.

"The wolf kills him?"

"Perhaps. What would you think of your own chances in the same situation?"

"I don't know. It was a foolish thing for him to do, go out in the storm alone, ill-armed."

"Yes, it was."

"What is the meaning of that song, minstrel?"

Alaric smiled. "It's just a song. Must it have a meaning?"

Daugas thought for a moment. "We are the goatherd, and the Red Lord is the wolf."

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"You have a lively imagination," said Alaric. "What is the goat, then?"

"The goat is a goat. Food. Life. We chance the Red Lord's retribution by stealing food from his valley. So far he has not caught us. Is that what the song says, minstrel?"

"If you wish it to say that." He strummed another chord. "Every song has many meanings."

Daugas half turned away, gazing at Alaric from the corner of his eye. "This day, my belly is full. It has not been so in a long time. Can you hunt again as you did today?"

"I think so."

"Then I hope you will stay with us."

"I don't intend to stay here forever, Daugas. And after I leave, you'll be hungry again."

Daugas shifted from one foot to the other, but he said nothing.

"And some winter," Alaric continued, "there will not be enough roots and berries, nor enough game of any kind, nor an opportunity to steal from the valley, and then you will be forced ... to eat each other?" He looked up sharply. "Or have you done that already?"

Daugas glanced away from him.

Alaric plucked a series of high, sweet notes from his lute, a melancholy air that never failed to make him think of weeping women. "I wonder," he murmured, "how do you choose the victim? Do you draw lots? Or is it the weakest? The oldest? Perhaps—"

"Enough!" shouted Daugas. He faced Alaric, his hands closing into fists at his sides. "We live on the edge of death, and we do what we must to stay alive!"

"You *must* stay in these mountains and prey upon each other when there is no other prey?"

"We have no choice."

Alaric shrugged. "I don't agree. But you certainly have no courage."

"You are so sure of yourself, minstrel!"

"I intend to leave these mountains alive. I think you can do the same."

Daugas squatted and picked up a stick to stir the fire, which was burning low. "You have been very lucky, minstrel. I don't know if we could divide that luck among twelve people and have anything left of it."

Alaric made no reply to that, only strummed his lute and thought about his own journey to the valley of the Red Lord. He had used his power occasionally, to travel a bit faster and more comfortably than other men, and earlier in the season than most would dare. But he had seen no bottomless chasms, no unclimbable passes on his route. The land had been unstable with the thaw, and he had narrowly escaped several shifting masses of earth and rock, but with every additional day, summer came nearer, and the land dried and hardened; already the runoff from melting snow had ceased, leaving the streams fed only by springs. The peaks themselves were bare to the sky.

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These folk, he thought, were surely mountaineers enough to manage a crossing.

"Do you plan to stay here with me all night?" asked Alaric.

Daugas nodded.

"And in the morning ... what?"

"Berown said he would be back in the morning. He said they would all be back."

"To decide my fate, yes?"

"I'm sure they're talking about you."

"If I chose to stand up at this moment and walk away from you, Daugas, what would you do?"

"I'd try to stop you. But I don't want either of us to be hurt, minstrel. So please don't try to leave."

Alaric smiled. "I'm in no hurry, my friend. I was just ... curious." And then he sang another song, and another, and so he amused himself for the rest of the afternoon, and Daugas listened.

Some time after sunset, Alaric laid his lute down, wrapped himself in his cloak, and pretended to fall asleep. He watched through slitted eyes as Daugas pushed the embers of the fire aside and curled up on the spot they had warmed. Daugas appeared to sleep almost immediately, but Alaric lay still until soft snores began to escape his guard's half-open mouth. Then, he edged away, pulling his lute gently, with fingers flat on the strings, muffling them from even an accidental note. When he had melted into the shadows that surrounded the campsite, he vanished. He preferred to spend the night elsewhere, not because he feared Daugas, but because he did not know how early in the morning the others would return. He had no desire to be caught sleeping by people who might have made their decision to kill him. He knew a bower in the dense woods where men seldom hunted. He tore down some springy branches for his bed, and he rested well, far from the hard and stony ground of the mountains.

He woke shortly after dawn and traveled back, lute slung over his shoulder, cloak rolled under his arm. He appeared some distance from the campsite and walked to it. Berown and the other exiles had already arrived, and they were all shouting at Daugas for letting Alaric get away. The first person to see the minstrel approach had to punch his neighbors to make them leave off their abuse and look behind them.

Alaric smiled. "Good morn to you all, friends. I hope you slept as well as I did."

Berown turned a tight-mouthed gaze on the minstrel. He wore the sword and the fine-tooled scabbard on a length of rawhide tied about his waist. "Where did you go?" he asked.

Alaric waved in the direction from which he had walked. "The wind was too brisk here last night, and so I moved to a better spot. But Daugas was sleeping so soundly that I hadn't the

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heart to disturb him. He must have been very tired."

Berown glanced back at Daugas. "We could all be dead because of your tiredness."

"I hardly think so," said Alaric. "I'm really a harmless fellow."

"I watched him till he fell asleep," said Daugas. "I didn't think he could get very far in the middle of the night."

"You watched him till *you* fell asleep," said Berown. He stared at Daugas for a long moment, and then he slapped him. "That's to remind you that he could have killed you."

Daugas rubbed at the red mark on his cheek with one hand. "I don't think he wants to kill any of us. I think he wants to help us."

"I told you to stay awake!"

Alaric said, "You can't expect soldier's discipline from starving people."

Berown looked at Alaric once more. "You are a most unusual person, minstrel. You have shown that you can move about these mountains better than we can, that you can hunt where there is no game and pass through bandit country without being touched. You could have left last night, and I'm sure that none of us could have followed you, but you chose to stay. Why?"

"I do want to help you."

"Why?"

"Because I pity you."

Berown laughed, a short, hard laugh with no humor in it.

"Need there be another reason?" asked Alaric.

"And what can you do for us with your pity, minstrel? Hunt again? Stay and hunt for us forever? Would you do that, minstrel?"

"No," said Alaric. He looked around the group. "I suppose no one thought to bring Daugas and me a bit of breakfast?"

Berown motioned peremptorily, and one of the other men stepped forward to hand the minstrel a chunk of venison. Alaric thanked him, then set it atop a nearby rock as he knelt on the ground beside the ashes of the fire — they were still warm, but there was no live coal among them for a fresh blaze. Taking flint and steel and tinder from his knapsack, Alaric struck a new fire, feeding it scraps from the pile of wood he had gathered the day before until it burned brightly. Then he sliced the meat, as he had done the liver, and set it on pointed sticks to broil. He gestured for Daugas to squat beside him.

"You know," said Alaric, as if speaking to Daugas alone, "you have two choices. One is to leave the mountains and find a fresh life elsewhere, perhaps in some other valley or even on the southern plains. There are other lands than this one — lands whose lords are strong enough to keep evil men away and yet are kind and just and would be shocked to hear of a lord who used his people as if they were his cattle. You could be farmers again and live without fear."

"And the other choice?" asked Daugas.

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Alaric lifted a piece of meat from the flames and nibbled delicately at its crisping edges. "Has the Red Lord an heir with the same love for peasant torture as he has himself?" he inquired.

"He has no heir at all," said Daugas.

Alaric chewed a juicy morsel, then swallowed. "Your second choice, then, is to return to your own valley."

"That is no choice at all," said Daugas.

"It would be, if the Red Lord were dead."

"Dead!" said Berown, his voice heavy with scorn. "And how would you kill him, minstrel?"

"I have a plan. But I'll not tell you about it."

Berown shook his head. "Fool. You'll be the one to die, not him."

Alaric smiled. "I hunt where there is no game, Berown. I travel without fear of bandits. When I say I can do a thing, I mean it."

"Do you think it's never been tried? The last time, the fool was a long time dying. And his head hung on a pike above the battlements until the crows picked the skull clean."

"I can kill him," said Alaric.

Daugas looked up at Berown. "What if he speaks the truth?"

"He's mad."

"But *if*," said Daugas.

Berown stepped close to Alaric, stood above him, glaring down. "I'll tell you what would happen if you killed him, minstrel, if by some impossible stroke of luck you killed him. We might live well for a year or two or even more, but someday the bandits would come down out of the mountains, and there would be no Red Lord to stop them."

"If they exist," said Alaric.

"You think they don't?"

"I think they are a tale told by the Red Lord to keep his people from assassinating him."

"I have seen them."

"Years ago," said Alaric.

"I have no reason to believe they have gone away, and you'll not convince me of it. I remember the Red Lord burning his own fields to kill the bandits. And I remember their shouts as they vowed to return someday and destroy us all. Some of these others may be too young to have such memories, but *I* am not."

"You fear the bandits more than you fear him," said Alaric.

"Yes."

Alaric looked around at the crowd. "You others — you feel the same?"

There was much muttering from the group and, eventually, nodding. "We couldn't live up here if the bandits weren't afraid of him," said Gedimina.

"But you wouldn't be living up here at all if he were dead."

"And if he were dead," said Berown, "no one would be living down there."

"Don't kill him, minstrel," said Gedimina. "I'd rather be alive in the mountains than dead in the valley."

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Alaric shook his head and looked at Berown. "It's you who has convinced them of this."

"No, minstrel. We heard it at our mothers' knees. The Red Lord keeps our valley safe, and long life to him."

"Long life," echoed the other exiles.

Alaric scanned their faces, shimmering in the air beyond the fire. "And if I should decide to kill him anyway?"

Gedimina sank to her knees beside him and clutched his arm. "No, please, no."

He looked at her contorted face. "You believe I can kill him?"

"Yes, I believe!"

He peered into the flames. "I was going to do it. For you, for all of you. And for the others, the ones who still live in the valley. But ... they wouldn't thank me, would they?"

"No," said Berown. He frowned. "You really think you can, don't you?"

Alaric had to laugh. "I can, but it no longer seems the proper thing to do." He glanced at Daugas. "That leaves the first choice, doesn't it?"

"If you'll show me the way," said Daugas, "I'll go out of the mountains with you."

"Well, that's one less mouth for the mountains to feed," said Alaric. He looked up. "What about the rest of you? I'll lead you out."

"Past the bandits," muttered Berown.

Daugas said, "Malgis?" He lifted his hand, and after a long moment she came out of the crowd, the baby in one arm, and linked her fingers with his.

"Who else?" said Alaric.

They just stared at him with wide eyes.

Berown said, "We'll never see any of you alive again."

"That's true," said Alaric, "but not because the bandits will kill us."

"You'll be carrion within a few days."

"No, but perhaps *you* will be. That deer won't last much longer. And then what will you do?"

"We'll find something," said Berown.

Alaric thought of hunting for them once again, but he saw the futility in that; they would not be able to eat what he brought them before it spoiled. *And after all,* he thought, *I owe them nothing.* He gathered up his pack and lute. "Get your belongings together," he told Daugas and Malgis. "We'll leave as soon as you're ready." He turned to Berown. "My sword, sir." With some reluctance, the leader of the exiles handed the weapon over, and Alaric slipped it into his pack.

"We are ready," said Daugas. "We have no belongings."

Alaric eyed their tattered clothing and the rags that wrapped the baby Malgis held. "Very well," he said. "As long as the weather is fine, let us go."

They walked easily in the spring sunlight, and they spoke little. Alaric kept a careful eye on the ground beneath his feet, and he hummed snatches of melody to the ragged rhythm of

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his step. Occasionally, he bade his companions stay where they were while he scouted the terrain ahead; at those times he walked beyond their sight and then used his own mode of travel to flit forward and determine the easiest passage. This was the route he had taken to the Red Lord's domain, and although he knew it could be traversed on foot, there were some difficult stretches. They camped that night at the very edge of the territory that Malgis and Daugas knew. The baby, who had not cried all day, whimpered now with the oncoming chill of night, and the small fire that Alaric built was not enough to comfort it. He gave Malgis his lute wrap for it, then, and slept with the instrument close against his bosom.

In the morning, he stole a pair of chickens from a distant farmyard, not wanting to waste traveling time lying in wait for a wild creature. After the meal, they resumed their journey.

In his scouting forward, Alaric saw no trace of other human beings, but the farther they walked from familiar territory, the more nervous Malgis became. Her eyes moved constantly, and she walked a little behind the others, always glancing back, as if expecting someone to follow. At first Alaric just smiled and reassured her that there were no other people nearby, but as the sun sank in the west, her nervousness began to communicate itself to him, and he ranged farther in his scouting, both forward and back, seeking some source of danger. That night they camped under overhanging rocks, and she begged Alaric not to make a fire. Unable to calm her fears, he acquiesced.

The following day dawned gray. The rain had begun while the sky was still dark, and their rock shelter was scarcely enough to protect them from the wet. Daugas and Malgis huddled together, the baby between them, and Alaric sat shielding his lute for a time before he decided that he was too hungry to let the rain deter him. He went out, leaving his cloak to wrap the lute, and returned, drenched, with a rabbit. They had no small trouble cooking it while the rain spattered their fire. Malgis stamped the flames out as soon as the meat was done enough to suit Alaric.

"No one would be out in this weather to see the fire," he said.

"You were out," said Malgis.

"If the bandits are as desperate as I was," he replied, "they would do well to find some other way of life."

"How is it," said Malgis, "that you always find game when you go out, and yet *we* have found so little?"

Alaric smiled. "I'll tell you a secret, my friend: when I was a child, we had a bad summer, and the crops on my parents' farm died; and then we had a bad winter, and the game in the woods disappeared. My parents were almost starving, and though they gave me more food than they took themselves, I was a sack of bones barely covered

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with skin. And so we decided to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Well at Canby. We walked, though it was far, and all along the road we begged crusts of bread and rinds of cheese from travelers. At last we came to the well, and my father threw in the only coin we had in the world, and he prayed that we might not starve. I prayed, too, as I recall, though I really didn't know what I was about — I prayed hard. And after a while, other pilgrims wanted to pray at the well, for it was a very popular shrine in those days, and so we went into the woods to gather wood for that night's fire. We had not been among the trees for more than a few moments when a rabbit bounded out from behind a stone and stopped in front of us, sitting up on his hind legs and looking at us as if he expected us to perform some wonderful deed. My father took the knife from his belt very slowly, raised it very slowly, and still the rabbit stayed where it was. Then my father flung the knife and impaled the creature, and very soon we had a delicious meal. Ever after that day, my father was able to find game when we were hungry, and so am I."

"Where is this Canby?" asked Daugas.

"Far from here," said Alaric. "You would have to walk half a year and more to reach it."

"And does the well always grant the prayers of pilgrims?"

Alaric shrugged. "I cannot speak for anyone else." He glanced toward his lute, but decided against unwrapping it while the rain still fell. Having just made up the tale of the pilgrimage, he rather liked it and stored it away in his capacious memory, to be set to music on some other day.

"Perhaps that's the same good fortune that keeps you safe from bandits," murmured Malgis.

Alaric made no reply but only gnawed the bones of the rabbit and watched the sky for a glimpse of sun. That came at last, well past noon, and with it the end of the rain. Alaric stood up and stepped into the sunshine. "Shall we go on?"

Pools of water lay everywhere, hiding sharp or slippery stones in their muddy depths, and the streams were indistinguishable from their banks. Soon all three travelers were spattered with mud to their waists, and Alaric's boots, stout though they were, had begun to leak. He called a halt before dark, for they were approaching a steep descent, and he preferred to make it when the light was fresh and the ground dry.

Once more Malgis balked at building a fire, but Alaric argued that they were wet as well as cold and would all have fevers by morning without a blaze. They built it, finally, among large boulders, and they leaned so close to it that Alaric doubted any light got past their screen of flesh.

The next day, Malgis gazed down the plunging slope and did not wish to go farther.

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"It isn't as difficult as it looks," said Alaric.

She sat down on the ground. "I can't," she said.

"I'll take the child," said Daugas. "It will be easier for you then."

She clutched the baby to her bosom. "No."

"Malgis!"

She looked up at him with wild eyes. "Listen to me. They're waiting for us out there." She pointed sharply at Alaric. *"He's leading us to them."*

Daugas shook his head. "The minstrel is our friend."

"He's been lighting fires to show them our path. Why should they come after us when we'll be walking right into their camp?"

Daugas knelt and closed his arms about her. "No."

"He tried to make the others come, too, but they weren't foolish enough to believe him." She pulled away from him. "But *you* were!"

Daugas glanced at Alaric, despair on his face. "I thought she would be all right," he said, "with a full belly."

Alaric looked down at the woman. "I mean you no harm, Malgis."

"Liar!"

"Have I not fed you? Have I not given you the wrapping of my most precious possession for your baby?"

Tears welled from her eyes. "Take me home, Daugas," she pleaded. "Oh, please, take me home."

"I'll take you to a new home," he said, catching one of her hands between his own. "Across the mountains."

She shook her head violently. "Please!"

"You don't want to go back there," said Alaric, squatting beside her. "There's nothing for you there but cold and hunger."

"She means the valley," said Daugas. "She always means the valley." He stroked her dirty, tangled hair with one hand. "Oh, Malgis, trust us and come along."

As if in reply, she jerked Alaric's dagger from its sheath at his belt.

In the instant that her hand reversed its arc to strike him, he vanished.

He found himself in the woods, in the bower where he had spent the night when Daugas watched him, and he cursed the reflex that had sent him there. Another man would have caught her wrist and forced her to drop the blade; another man might have suffered a scratch on shoulder or chest wrestling the knife from her grip. But Alaric had vanished into thin air, proving himself something other than a normal human being.

Proving himself a witch.

It was a name he did not want. People feared and avoided witches. And tried to kill them.

Almost, he did not go back. He was vulnerable to Malgis and Daugas now and would never again dare turn his attention away from them, even for a moment. Yet, he felt responsible for their lives, having brought them so far,

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and now that he had exposed himself, he thought he might as well cut their journey short and take them out of the mountains in his own way. After he had found some secure place for the knife.

For safety's sake, he reappeared a short distance from the spot he had left. He had been gone a few heartbeats. Daugas still knelt at the top of the steep slope.

Malgis was gone.

Alaric glanced about quickly, to see if she had run away, but even as he did so, he knew what had happened. He remembered precisely where he had been squatting, with his back to the brink. The force of her knife thrust had plunged Malgis over the edge.

Daugas rose slowly, like a man in a dream, and started his descent. He did not notice Alaric following softly after. He clung to the rocks as he climbed down among them, and his hands left each surface as if pulling away from honey. When he reached her, he eased his arms around her and gently lifted her head to rest on his thigh.

She had fetched up against a boulder halfway down the slope, and there was blood on her face and arms and knees. The baby lay nearby, silent. Alaric looked at it and then wished he had not.

Daugas was whispering her name.

Alaric saw his knife wedged among the rocks farther down the incline. He made no move to retrieve it.

Her eyes opened. "Daugas?"

"I am here?"

"Where is the baby?"

He looked around slowly, saw the child, stared at it for a long moment, and then said, "I think the baby is hurt."

One hand clutching the boulder, she pulled herself into a sitting posture. "Bring him here."

Daugas crawled over to the child and lifted it. The small body lay limp in his grasp as he took it to Malgis.

She looked into her baby's ruined face. With a corner of one of her rags, she tried to wipe the blood away. Then she laid her ear against the tiny chest. Her head was still bent in that position when she said, "He's dead."

Daugas said, "Yes," and tried to take the corpse from her hands, but she would not allow that.

"I'll carry him," she said, "until we get hungry."

Alaric felt his gorge rise. "Bury it," he said. "I'll see that you're fed."

Daugas looked up then and cringed away from the minstrel. "Go away!" he cried. "Leave us alone!"

"I never meant to cause you harm."

For answer, Daugas touched the still form that lay in Malgis's embrace.

"Should I have stayed and let her kill me?" Alaric demanded. "She brought this on herself; will you tell me that I should have traded my life for your child's life?" His hands tightened into fists as the man and woman made no move, no reply. "Bury it," he said at last, harshly and loud in the moun-

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tain quiet, "and I'll take you to safety ... by magic."

Daugas shook his head. "We want no part of your magic."

"There is no danger involved," said Alaric.

"No."

"You'll feel nothing. In the blink of an eye you'll be far from these mountains. I know a good land where you'll be able to make a new life."

"No."

Alaric stepped one pace closer, and Daugas shrank back, his arm circling Malgis protectively. She, still hunched over the baby, seemed not to notice what was going on around her.

"Are you afraid of me?" asked the minstrel.

"Please leave us alone," said Daugas.

"I kept my vow to bring you food, did I not? Now I swear to you that I can take you to a better place as easily as I can breathe. Come along, Daugas."

He shook his head.

"But what will you do if you don't come with me?"

"We'll go back," said Daugas.

"You'll starve."

"We'll find food somehow."

Alaric sighed heavily. "I could take you against your will, you know."

"If you try, I'll gouge your eyes out, I swear it."

"I only want to help you, Daugas!"

"Liar!" he said. "Don't you think I

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know what you are?"

"I am your friend."

"Liar! What witch was ever a friend to anyone?"

Alaric looked down the slope, towards his knife, which gleamed in the morning sunshine. "All right," he said. "Be your own masters." He began a careful descent, giving a wide berth to the man and woman, who remained motionless, one of them watching him. He picked up the blade and sheathed it. He glanced up, one last time. "Farewell, and good fortune to you both."

The dimness of the dense wood was welcome to him. He sat down in his bower, head in his hands. He felt cold, though the spring air was warm enough. There was a tightness in his chest when he thought of the gifts he had given the people of the mountains — a few meals of venison and a dead child. No matter that the death was partly caused by a woman's madness. *He* had made it possible: if he had not convinced Daugas to leave, if he had not squatted by the brink, if — above all — he did not possess a witch's power, then the image of the bloody child would not now be filling his heart.

After a time, he slipped the lute and pack from his shoulders and lay back upon the boughs. He was not done with the mountains yet. Above him, he could see the sky through many layers of leaves; there was a full day ahead of him, a day for rest and planning. After dusk, he would return to the Red Lord's valley, and while human and animal slept the dark time away, he would steal goats. He did not relish the thought of traveling with kicking, bleating burdens; he would gain a few bruises, he knew, from this night's work. And he would have to dodge guardian dogs and the masters wakened by their barking. It would not be a simple matter, not like stealing chickens from a closed coop; this night would test his reflexes to their limits. He found his heart beating faster at thought of the danger, but he did not let that weaken his resolve. He would gather a herd for the people of the mountains, tame goats that would not shy from men, that would eat the tough grasses of the heights and give milk and meat and skins in return. He would gather the herd that they were afraid to gather for themselves and bring it to their mountain fastness without leaving any trail that mortal men could follow. He would give them life and, with that gift, wipe the image of the dead child from his heart. And he would have some small vengeance on the Red Lord in the bargain, by helping his exiles to survive.

Of them all, Daugas might guess the source of the gift; Alaric hoped he would not be foolish enough to frighten the others into starving while a witch's goats thrived before their eyes. Then he thought of Malgis. She would eat. They would all eat, when they were hungry enough.

And Alaric would be free at last to travel on.

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"Hold still, will you? Or I'll never get the thing untangled."

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Marta Randall is a young sf novelist who lives in the San Francisco Bay area and whose books include A CITY IN THE NORTH and JOURNEY (Pocket Books). She is currently working on a sequel to JOURNEY, a portion of which will be published in F&SF. It's a pleasure to welcome her to these pages with this superior piece of science fiction.

The View From Endless Scarp

BY

MARTA RANDALL

The last slim ship nosed up and through the scant layer of clouds, leaving a faint glimmer of exhaust in its wake, and was not yet out of sight when Markowitz leaped from the parched tumble of boulders in which she lay hidden, sprinted to the landing field, and hopped about like one possessed, throwing her arms in the air, screaming, weeping, begging the ship to return. The ship did not falter in its ascent, and by the time it had punched its way out of the implacable sphere of blue sky, she lay exhausted on the hard ground, fingers scrabbling, muttering faintly to herself. The departure hadn't gone exactly as she'd planned, but the results were the same, and Markowitz, wretched in the dirt, remained perhaps the only human being on planet.

A particularly courageous Peri scuttled down the hill, approached her cautiously and, after a moment of hesitation, flung a rock at her. She cursed but did not move, and the Peri lifted its narrow, snouted head and produced the high, irritating whine that was the Peri giggle. Immediately the populations of three separate tribes tumbled down the hill and poured through the abandoned village, grabbing, stealing, fighting over the bedraggled remnants of the once-proud colony. They paraded around the landing field, decked in detritus. One skinny old male wrapped a thread-worn jacket over his grey-furred shoulders, mounted a dented canister on his head, and stumped about with great dignity, but Markowitz was not moved to laughter. Within an hour the village had disappeared save for the shattered foundations of the houses. These, too, would gradually find their way, in bits and pieces, to the Peri villages. Markowitz didn't care. The ship was gone. The ship

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would not return. After a time the words stopped repeating themselves automatically, and she stared at the harsh blue sky without conscious thought. The Peri left, dragging the last of their loot behind them.

The sun moved calmly overhead. She turned her face from it and remembered Thompson. That absurd hysteria on the landing field; she was no better than the rest of them, would just as easily have assumed him dead to save her own skin. She turned her head again, both ashamed and relieved, and stood to a place of absolute desolation, a burned and dried landscape in which nothing moved save her shadow across the cracked earth. She foraged a meal of unripe berries and bitter roots; the pump of the village well was gone, but she lowered her cup through the narrow opening of the pipe and gained, after an hour's work, a drink of water. Another two hours' work filled her canteen, and by midafternoon she left the ruins of the village and walked slowly to the brink of Endless Scarp. She sat under a dead tree, her feet dangling over the immense drop, and waited for night to fall.

The view from Endless Scarp had once, briefly, been a view of paradise. The Terrans had come to a place of drought and death and gradually brought rain, brought crops, caused the earth to flower and bear fruit. Within a Peri generation they had changed the face of their world, and the Peri had changed with it. No need to move with the migrating game, for the game now stayed year-long on the high plateau, held by the abundance of food. No need to forage over the wide plain for berries and roots, which now grew plentifully and consistently. No need to sow even the minimal crops which the Peri had planted during their migrations, seeding the slap-dash fields one season and returning to harvest the crops the next. No need to build sturdily and well, for when the houses collapsed and the land was fouled, there were many equally fine places to make a village. Peri had never been builders in the nomadic centuries; no need to do so now.

Fat clouds slipped eastward from the sea, up the high slopes of the continent, to drop rain on the angles of the Scarp and into the wide plain. Rivers widened and deepened, the desert turned green. The Terrans planted trees and they flourished; they sowed crops and they grew. The small, slender Peri added weight under their silvery coats, and Terrans went to their new villages and cured the sick, set up schools, listened to Peri music and made music of their own. The Peri laughed and capered and accepted Terran teachings, and the Terrans smiled and approved, knowing that in two generations, or perhaps four, the Peri would become small, alien versions of their benefactors. The Terrans had been given a desert world to colonize and succeeded in making a piece of it green. They were fruitful and multi-

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plied. They benefitted the natives. They prospered. They were remarkably proud of themselves.

The sky deepened from blue to rose, and the shadow of the Scarp cast long, red fingers across the scorched plain. Not even the hardy meka trees grew there now; they had died of overprosperity and had not reappeared with the return of drought. Markowitz stared into the increasing darkness, hoping as always for a faint, distant glimmer of light. Day tumbled into night and no fires glowed; if Thompson built a signal fire, he built it beyond the curve of the horizon. She did not doubt that there was, somewhere, a fire, and as she watched she was overtaken by a sudden, powerful longing, not for the safety of the departed rescue ships, but for the dubious comfort of Thompson's arms. She closed her eyes, beset by tactile memories, then shook her head angrily and looked across the desert. Memory now was liability and could wait on reality again. Her vision cleared, and the rose tints of the plain darkened to purple. The air chilled rapidly.

She took her jacket from around her waist and put it on, then walked from cave to cave, prying boulders from their niches and extracting the things she had hidden. Some of the Peri followed at a distance, curious; although they promptly investigated every hiding place after she had emptied it, they did not approach her. She ignored them. They would not steal her belongings as long as she carried them.

She built a fire in the mouth of the last cave, and in its flickering light she loaded her supplies into the carrying pack, strapped the knives to her belt, and ate a handful of berries. She wet her lips from the canteen and, after stringing vines and gourds across the cave's entrance as an alarm, she lay with her head on the pack and stared at the patch of night behind the rocks. A million stars, and no fires. Eventually she fell asleep.

Twenty years of prosperity; then, in one dark and terrifying month, the engines of change broke down. When the windstorms lessened and the earthquakes ceased, hundreds of Terrans and thousands of Peri were dead, and the Terrans gradually traced the origins of disaster. An arctic storm had jammed the unjammable metering station at the pole; a backup unit failed, a defective casing on the self-repair devices cracked, letting in the deadly cold. The wrong circuit activated the wrong relay in the delicate sensing and transmitting mechanism in the monitor's core. Then Hohbach died in the last quake, and with him any explanation for why so simple a change had fathered catastrophe. The colony knew only that the wrong signal beamed up to the great climate-engines in the satellites, and the engines responded with a burst of energy such that they

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passed their safety limits and destroyed themselves in one awesome burst. The moon, so carefully nudged into a new course, so cautiously modified to modify the tides, twisted in the sky and found a new orbit; the earth heaved and groaned, and the winds shrieked beyond limit. When the planet stabilized, the patterns of the oceans changed. The rains fell far out to sea, and within a season the broad, ripe plain withered, the river shrank to a trickle and then to muddy puddles, and even these baked away in the fierce sunlight.

The funeral pyres of the Peri burned long into the night, for they still honored their dead then. The Terrans collected their dead and buried them, taking comfort from the rituals and words. Scouting parties traveled west and returned, dying, to report that the ocean was unnavigable, the storms would not subside for decades. Portions of the shore sank, others were still beset by tidal waves, none had fresh water. The desert extended as far east as scouts could walk and canteens last; they found no springs, no arable land, no hope, no help. The Peri spoke of trekking eastward to a verdant land they claimed to know. Although the Terrans failed to convince them that such a land, had it existed, would have perished in the calamity, few of the Peri left. The Terrans decided that the land was mythological and forgot it. The springs failed. For a short time the colony maintained distilling stations along the ocean shore, and water was laboriously transported across the low coastal hills to the village. But the stations broke down, or were vandalized by the Peri, or taken in storms, and the supply of brackish water stopped. They expended the last of their dwindling power to drill the village well deeper, rationed water at a cup a day for each, and sent out calls for help.

Four years later the calls were answered. The colony had dwindled from two thousand to less than four hundred. They died of lack of water, lack of food, lack of hope. The Peri, too, died. Burial customs were the first things forgotten, both the fire ceremonies developed under the tutelage of the Terrans and the old rituals of the nomadic time. They sowed neither the seeds of rains nor the seeds of drought; they lived in their villages until the houses rotted around them and moved on to others only slightly less decayed. They forgot the rituals of marriage, of childbirth, of the seasons, of life. But they laughed, sitting starving in the harsh daylight; laughed and shuffled in terrible parody of their dances and watched each other and the Terrans die with high good humor, cackling and rocking and plucking perilice from their dull, unhealthy coats.

"We did better than the Peri," Markowitz said in her dream and woke to wonder from where the words had come. The Peri had lost everything: their food, their water, their culture, eventually even their desire to help each other, their sense of themselves as

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fellows of the same creation. They stole food and water from the dying; they played practical jokes of fatal consequence on each other. They gathered at the outskirts of the Terran village and giggled as they watched their erstwhile benefactors struggling to survive, carefully apportioning food and water, aiding the ill, whispering words of encouragement in the dense sunlight or the cold night. Markowitz remembered her mother moving from house to house, caring for the infirm or elderly, bringing their rations of food and water, talking of the rescue ships which were approaching, had to be approaching, would arrive at any hour now, any day. She pleaded, humored, and bullied people to live, and when she died, most of them died with her.

She died because, while foraging for berries and roots, she fell and broke her leg and could not crawl from the ravine in which she lay. The Peri thought her death quite funny. When Markowitz found her, it was too late.

Markowitz hissed furiously in the blackness of the cave and flung a rock. It clattered and banged against the gourds, a startling, terrifying sound in the night. Outside, Peri voices laughed and shouted. Markowitz cursed and turned toward sleep again.

She woke to the pale light of dawn. The Peri were still laughing. She checked her pack and left the cave without a backward look, climbed down the precipitous face of Endless Scarp, and walked east across the plain.

Most of her Peri followers dropped during the morning, but one, [illegible]n the others, continued tailing her. When she stopped to rest out the hottest part of the day, he dropped to a squat beside her in the shelter of a dying tree.

"Give me food," he said without much hope, and when she refused he did not ask further but remained beside her, staring aimlessly across the baking plain. After a time he stood and ambled away, returning as she began her walk again.

"Where are you going?" he said as he fell into step beside her.

"East."

"There is nothing to the east," he said positively. She did not answer and lengthened her step. He scurried to keep up, and although he was soon panting, he did not fall behind. She slowed her walk again, through fatigue rather than sympathy. Their shadows stretched across the hardpan before them, gaunt and sharp-edged in the late sunlight. The rim of the plain disappeared into a horizon of suspended dust. A few dying trees and stumps broke the flatness. The silence was absolute.

"My name is Kre'e," the Peri offered eventually.

"Kre'e," she replied with automatic politeness, and he grinned. "Kre'e, go home. I do not want your company."

"I'm only walking in the same direction," he said, insulted.

"Then walk on a different path."

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"This is the only path going east."

She looked over the unbroken plain, on which any route would serve equally well. He followed her glance, grinned again, and although he dropped a pace behind, he did not leave. They walked in silence into the night.

She made camp that evening on the bank of a dead river, and while she dug through the mud in search of water, Kre'e found some shriveled roots. He ate as many as he could, then brought the remaining few to her as she gave up her task and retreated to the fire.

"I don't want them," she said, evading his attempt to claim a share right.

"Give me water."

"Get your own."

"But you have extra water in your pouch, you have enough for both of us."

"I have just enough for me. I'll need it tomorrow. Get your own water."

"Why are you saving it? Let's drink it now, there will be more water tomorrow."

"Where?"

"Oh, there is always water."

"But you don't know," she said. "You would rather be lazy today and thirst tomorrow."

"Today's work is tomorrow's bounty," he said piously, parroting the lessons taught at Peri schools in paradise.

She stared at him and laughed. "Good, Kre'e. You remember well, but you'll get your own water anyway."

"We must share in all things," he said solemnly.

"Fetch your own."

He shrugged, giggled, and ambled down the bed of the river. She watched him, barely able to make out his pale form in the light of the fire. He seemed young, just entering his prime — no more than seven or eight years old. Old enough to have attended and remembered the colony's native schools, old enough to have lived through the month of terror and change. She looked away from him, wrapped her arms around her knees, and stared into the fire.

When Kre'e returned, he hunched so far over the fire that she demanded he move back. He sat just beyond the scorching point and tucked his small, dark hands between his thighs.

"You did not go with the others," he said.

"No."

"Why not? They were going to a land of fat rains." When she did not reply he said, "Perhaps you were not allowed to go. Possibly you did a thing for which they banished you."

She wondered what the lying, thieving, merciless Peri would consider a banishable crime, but remained silent. The fire burned lower.

"There's a man with a ship," she said finally, almost talking to herself. "Somewhere to the east, there's a man with a ship who's still waiting for us. He shouldn't be left there, he shouldn't have to wait alone." She glanced at the

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Peri. "Do you know him? The man with the ship?"

"To the east there is nothing, and then there is The Valley," Kre'e said. "Perhaps. But The Valley is nothing, is foolish, as foolish as giving up a land of rains for a man in a ship."

"You *do* know about him!"

"Of course. You just told me."

She clenched her fists and stared into the fire again. His hand moved casually toward her pack, but she saw and swung the pack away from him. He giggled and lay on his side while she looked about quickly, making sure that nothing of hers was within his reach. Passports to Thompson, she thought cloudily as she touched her knives, her canteen, and she yearned for him again.

"Ah," said Kre'e, with an air of sudden understanding. "You did not leave with the others because you have no family to claim passage right for you. I understand."

She turned on him furiously. "How did you know that? Where did you hear that?"

"But your parent died near the village —"

"Did you see it? Were you there? Did you watch my mother die?"

"Why are you shouting? She was old and sick and not useful anymore."

"Get out," she screamed. She leaped over the fire, grabbed his small body and threw him into the darkness. "Get out! Don't come back! Go away!" Her shouts became incoherent with grief and rage. She crawled around the fire, gathering all her belongings into a heap, and lay atop them. Eventually the rage faded, and she cried herself to sleep.

The colony had a small shuttle, a sturdy, space-worthy little ship that had gone out one night during the calamity and never returned. The third year of the disaster, Thompson told her that he had calculated the ship's flight, calculated the shifts and changes, and believed he knew its location. The ship would not have been large enough to carry the original colony, but sufficient, he thought, to carry the survivors from their dying home. They whispered about it, lying in each other's arms in the cold privacy of their crumbling house, and he convinced her with sketches, with charts scratched in the dirt, with sheer and possibly groundless hope.

Enough of the others eventually believed him so that, one bright morning, seven of them set out from the village, following Thompson and his optimistic calculations. She watched them from Endless Scarp as they trudged across the plain and faded into the omnipresent dust. She stayed behind to monitor the weak broadcasts of their remaining radio, to lead the survivors to the ship when the signal came. For two months she listened nightly at the prearranged time, hearing the weak, empty scratching of the radio; in the

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tenth week Thompson's voice came faintly. They had found the ship. It could be easily repaired. Five of them had died. In another four months, or perhaps five, the ship would be ready. He asked for all the colony's scraps, for wires, for metal, for anything his talented fingers and talented brain could use for repairs, and team after team marched across the plain, burdened with hope and detritus. Most of them died. The colony gathered nightly to hear Thompson's reports and whispered of faith and freedom. Then the broadcasts changed; they were dying, far to the east. Thirst and hunger, hard work and heat, recalcitrant materials and dangerous makeshift tools. The colony cried their encouragements through the rapidly weakening radio link; then the link broke, and a month later the rescue ships arrived from the heavy vault of space. We are saved, said the people. We are saved, we are saved. And the rescuers said, he is surely dead. We come from a cargo vessel, we have a schedule to keep, we can't spend time whizzing around your world looking for a corpse. He is dead, Markowitz. He is surely, surely dead.

The fire burned to embers and the embers to ash. She stood abruptly, amid her gear, and looked to the east. The darkness was unbroken save, above, for the beautiful, mindless dance of stars.

* * *

Throughout the next day's march, Kre'e stayed well away from her, although she could see him marching parallel to her and about fifty meters behind. Once, when she found a surviving patch of tae-fruit in a hollow and stopped to gather them, he came closer but she drove him off with rocks and curses.

The land she entered at evening had been, briefly, a fledgling forest. She found enough fallen wood amid the dead saplings to build a fairly large fire in the clearing she selected for her night's camp. A small breeze rose from the east, bringing with it a smell of dryness and thick, choking dust. She muffled her nose and mouth in her thin jacket, pulled the large reed hat down over her eyes, and sat in a double solitude of cloth and dust, feeling unbelievably lonely.

She lifted the jacket quickly for a sip of water and a handful of seeds, then bent her head, stuporous with fatigue. The ache in her feet became a distant throb, and her eyes seemed made of grit. She slept, still listening for the noise of Kre'e's stealthy, thieving approach.

She woke, alarmed, to smoke and heat, and ripped her jacket from her face. The fire had leaped its dirt walls — the forest of dead trees around her was in flames. She grabbed her pack. The canteen was already burning, but she snatched it up too and slapped it against her pants as she ran windward out of the forest. Her hands burned.

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She dashed onto the plain and the canteen burst, the flames sizzled and died, and her water rushed into the dry earth. Kre'e capered a few meters away, ecstatic with the force of his high, derisive Peri laughter. He glanced at her burned hands and broken canteen and laughed harder, and the fierce glow of the fire reflected bright red on his silver coat.

"Give me water!" he shouted and rolled on the ground in merriment. She rushed to him and kicked him, and he gasped and choked with laughter, rolling limply with her kicks while she sobbed and stumbled and fell exhausted to the ground. He jumped up and ran to her abandoned pack, grabbed it, and took it with him into the darkness.

"Give me food!" he cried, and giggled until he was out of earshot.

At dawn she stood slowly. Her hands were raw and aching, her fingers dry, every muscle and bone sore. The fire, having consumed all the saplings, still wafted one or two small banners of smoke through the air. Dust, ash, desolation. She had her clothing, her hat, the belt-full of knives, and her boots. She turned slowly in place; the view was changeless in all directions save for the barely visible fuzz of Endless Scarp on the far western horizon. Then, mechanically, she turned and trudged toward the east.

That first year they were full of strength and hope. They were, after all, the cream of galactic civilization, of the same stock as those who had conquered the stars. Of course they would survive. All they had to do was persevere.

Jema, her youngest, came running through the village to tell her that the Peri seemed to be migrating, and soon a number of Terrans entered the Peri village, prepared with speeches about the tribal necessity to follow the herds, at least until the Terrans had their weather-machines going again. Encouragement for the natives. Good words for the wogs. Household goods lay piled in the narrow alleys between the huts; roof beams had been lashed together to form drag-carriers, and Kore'ah, the elder, sat serene atop his lookout as he directed the preparations of the village. The Peri still cooperated then, and the Peri seemed to be moving away.

"There is a valley far to the east," Kore'ah declaimed when asked. "There is always water, the rains fall in season, and there is much game. There, on the far side of the plain." He waved vaguely eastward. The Peri trailed out across the desert, about fifty of them, all ages, the children scampering about the feet of the adults, and the adults shouting conflicting orders at each other. The Peri from neighboring villages came to watch, and one of them, squatting beside Markowitz, made the Peri gesture of derision.

"Kore'ah is an idiot," the Peri said with scorn. "There is no valley. My mother's father's brother told me so,

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and he was there once."

"But if he was there, then there must be a valley."

"Is there? Yes, of course there is. Naturally there is a valley," the Peri said with great assurance. "I simply meant that they will have difficulty reaching it. Of course the valley is there."

"But if the valley exists, why don't you all go?"

"We're not fools, like Kore'ah."

"You think that he will not reach the valley?"

"What valley?"

Then Jema, tired with excitement, fell asleep, and Thompson carried her home in his arms, up the steep trail to the village. Kore'ah did not return, although over the next half year seven or eight of his tribe straggled back to the Scarp, and all were vague about the journey and the fate of their companions. The Terrans shrugged, said "Peri" wisely, and dropped the subject.

Her father died, her daughters died. The Peri valley was mentioned more often. Another Peri village decamped and was followed for weeks, until it appeared that they were simply going in circles, with great seriousness, even trying not to laugh when one of them collapsed on the trail of hunger or thirst. The Terran observer returned convinced that the Peri were playing an elaborate practical joke, and once again the story of The Valley fell into dispute.

Years later, after Thompson's departure, when hope had appeared again, Markowitz idly asked a visiting Peri, "Have you come from The Valley?" the Peri danced quickly on the dead field. "We have our valley, you have your ship," she said and ran away. Markowitz shrugged and bent to the earth again, to pour ten precious drops of water on a sickly plant.

All that day she stumbled east, while Kre'e moved just in sight ahead of her, dwarfed by the large pack on his back. She found a hollow where faran roots had grown, but Kre'e had been there first, eaten his fill, and burned the remaining roots with his fire kit. She chewed on dried canes to appease her hunger. Her mouth was dry. She followed him across a dried lake bed, and although he muddied the one waterhole, she nonetheless managed to swallow a sip or two before the mud choked her. He waited on the far shore until she stood again, and moved ahead. By nightfall she was too tired to hate him.

He built a small fire and ignored her when she crouched shivering just beyond the zone of light. No laughter that night; his face was utterly impassive as he ate the handful of insects he had collected during the day's march. She watched, repulsed and hungry, as he finished the last one, kicked the fire under, and curled down to sleep. When she tried to creep closer to the fire circle, he drove her off with

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rocks. She wondered where he had found the bugs.

The next morning Endless Scarp was below the horizon, and the world was entirely flat. The image was misleading, for by midday they had entered a land of ravines, all of which ran either north-south or northeast to southwest. Their steep sides were cloaked in brambles or treacherous under layers of sliding stones, and by watching Kre'e she learned to slide sitting down each slope and use the brambles to pull herself up the other side. The mud she had packed on her burned fingers the day before dried and flaked away, and she grimly forced her fingers to close around the prickly limbs and branches, which often cracked and disintegrated in her grasp. She grew weaker and dizzy with heat and thirst; it took longer to slide down and push up again, but Kre'e always managed to be no more than one ravine ahead, and she often found him sitting calmly on her pack, waiting for her reappearance before he entered the next small gorge. When she stumbled and fell she could hear his giggle, and the sound was always enough to make her rise and move again.

She wanted to kill him. She thought about it while clawing dirt and pebbles from her mouth, while ignoring the pain of her hands. She would keep going until nightfall. She would avoid his camp until he was asleep. She would find a sharp stone and bash his head to splinters. Then she would stay near his corpse until a carrion bird landed, and she would kill the bird and eat it. This part of the plan gave her something approaching pleasure, and during the day she refined it and polished it, contemplating the best way to kill the bird, whether she would kill it before or after it started eating Kre'e's corpse, whether, in the latter event, she would or would not eat the bird's stomach. Whether she could make a water sack from its skin. Or from Kre'e's. Whether the skin would need tanning first, or whether it would hold water now. And she realized that she'd been lying still for a very long time, that she could not get up. She sprawled at the top of a ravine, in full sunlight, and although the slim shade of a boulder lay not a meter from her limp fingers, she could not summon the energy to crawl that far.

Faintly, in the distance, Kre'e began to sing. It was a simple melodic line, repeated over and over, slowly gathering undertones as it became more plaintive. She turned her head slowly and looked at him. His distorted image wavered in the lines of heat rising from the far ravine and he seemed wraithlike, even closer to the mythical peri for which his people had been named. She hadn't heard a Peri sing in years, yet she recognized the mourning song in Kre'e's half-heard tones and realized that he was singing the death song for her. But she refused to die, she would not give him the satisfaction, and with infinite slowness she levered herself

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onto hands and knees, then all the way up. Kre'e's song dissolved into a riff of sweet, weak laughter as she stumbled toward him.

An hour later she found him at the bottom of a slope, gnawing on a small perimouse whose blood still flowed. He warned her off with a few well-aimed stones, and when he had eaten three-quarters of the mouse, he stood and left the remains lying on the rocks. He scrambled up the far bank of the ravine and dropped out of sight. For a Peri, it was a gesture of unprecedented charity. She chewed and gnawed until nothing remained but a small pile of hollowed bones, and, still greedy, fell asleep over them.

The rescue ships descended in a cloud of flames and dust. There were no cheers as the ports opened and the crew stepped out; the survivors simply stared, apathetic, at the rounded bodies and firm flesh, the clean skins and bright eyes. The rescuers, too, stared. One of them vomited. The ship's doctor began to cry.

They cared for the survivors, fed them, cured them, strengthened them. They were twice as alien as the Peri as they moved around the ruined village with long, elastic steps and loud voices. They spilled water on the ground and thought nothing of it. They opened pouches of food and threw away the wrappings without stopping to lick every bit clean, and they shouted at the survivors for doing so. They were horrified when the survivors could not remember the location of each and every grave. They set up large showers and bathed the colonists, letting precious water run freely into the ground, while the Peri hooted with laughter and the colonists stared in disbelief. The Peri drew great humor from the rescue, the fattening of the emaciated and the recuperation of the ill. Above all, they found the burial of the dead hilarious and would gather in groups of three or five above the graveyard to watch the crews, with solemn distaste, waste energy digging holes, making speeches, and shoveling dirt over the remains. Wasteful — corpses attract carrion birds, and carrion birds can be killed for food. The Peri howled with laughter, the colonists watched with amazement and distaste, the crew rushed through their tasks, eager to leave such a deadly, crazy world, eager to fulfill their chartered obligation to rescue distressed colonists, unload the survivors on Solon or Gates or some other medical planet, and get on to more profitable undertakings. And Markowitz went from one to the other, begging for the life of her lover.

"I've lost my father, my husband, my mother, my children, my brothers. Must I lose Thompson too? Because you cannot spare the time?"

The crew turned away from her weary request, muttering, "He's dead, woman. We can't go chasing ghosts. We've things to do."

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So she hid during the bustle of departure, and they did not look too thoroughly for her. And she woke, bent over the remains of an alien mouse, to a world of more ghosts than she could comprehend. Kre'e lay at the top of the ravine, and she went up toward him slowly. He rose well before she reached him and another day began.

That day she found a waterhole before he did. She drank her fill, plastered her burns with mud, then trampled through the hole until it was nothing but churned dirt. Kre'e made no effort to stop her. The pack weighed him down until they moved at the same speed through the violent terrain. Far ahead, hazy on the eastern horizon, a chain of mountains lurked above the desert.

"Where are you going?" he called from the top of a ravine.

"East."

"There is nothing to the east."

"Where are you going?" she called back.

"East."

"What is there to the east?"

"Nothing."

Nightfall, and the land of ravines fell away behind them. Morning, and the desert stretched over the curve of the world until it melted into the far mountains.

"Why do you journey?"

"Why do you journey?"

Kre'e laughed long and hard, but visibly weakened.

The day after, he stumbled and fell partway down a ravine, and she laughed so hard she had to sit down.

"You are a Peri," Kre'e said. He lay still, his leg twisted awkwardly under him. She stopped laughing.

"No."

"You are a Peri."

His words lifted her to a sudden plateau of clarity, from which she saw her progress since Endless Scarp, journey, fire, waterholes, food, hatred, laughter, each separate event outlined with a shocking distinctiveness, a terrifying luminosity of vision. Shaken, she looked down at him. He lay in a slight hollow, and his leg was broken. His leg was broken. His leg —

He made no resistance as she took the pack from him, nor did he speak when she straightened and splinted his leg. She took cleansers and salves from the pack and rubbed them over her burned hands, then shouldered the pack and strapped it on tightly before lifting Kre'e in her arms. He weighed very little, but she staggered and had to search carefully for balance.

"You are being stupid," he said.

"Shut up."

"Two shall die where one could live."

"Shut up."

"I would not do this for you."

"I am not a Peri."

They did not speak again. Within three hours they were both crawling. Twenty kilometers of desert — it took them twelve days. Most of his silver

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hair fell out. Her skin hung so loosely that it scraped the ground below her, and she could not sit upon her sharp and aching bones. They crawled silently, without looking ahead save to gauge their direction, without stopping save for the heat of the day or the occasional muddy waterhole. Once she caught a lizard; more often they ate bugs. He dragged his splinted leg, she dragged her pack. She didn't know when they reached the foothills, or when the ground beneath her began to slope. But she put her hand on something strange and coarse, and saw that it was grass, and fell into it forever.

She woke reluctantly because Kre'e was kicking her. He was kicking her to wake her. He was waking her to give her water.

Two days past that waterhole, they found a circle of stones filled with ashes, and in the fold of land beyond that the remains of the ship. Skeletons littered the small valley, fallen curled or straight, among the skeletons of birds. She could not tell which one was Thompson's. Perhaps the one with its hand draped over the dead radio. She moved the hand and turned the knobs of the radio. Click. Click. Click. Kre'e watched her, then went slowly about the camp, collecting the skeletal figures and pushing them into the ship. She watched without moving. When he was finished, he closed the door of the ship on them.

Kre'e stood solemnly by the door and lifted his arms.

"Ashes to ashes," he said after some hesitation. "Um, mud to mud, with luck. Sun to moon to whatever. And so on."

She looked at him in bewilderment, and he assumed a look of such gravity that she giggled, then laughed, then rolled about the camp shouting glee in the face of all the skeletons, all the uselessness, all the death. Then she stood, hit Kre'e as hard as she could, and trudged away from the camp. After a while, Kre'e followed.

A day higher into the mountains they found a small valley, no more than a forgotten tuck of land amid the dryness. Some fruit-bearing bushes, some plants with edible roots. A small spring which produced a scant liter of water twice a day. They remained for two months. Her hands healed. His leg knit, but with a permanent twist to it which caused him to limp. Strength returned gradually, but not so slowly as trust.

Came the day when she caught a tree snake and brought some of it back to Kre'e. Came the day when she slipped and twisted her leg, and instead of laughing, he helped her limp back to camp. Came the day when, instead of devouring berries or perimice as soon as they found or caught them, they saved enough water, started a fire, and made stew.

Came the day when she said, "Where are you going?"

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"To the valley," Kre'e said.

"What valley?"

"Over the mountains. The way is hard."

"Water? Fruits? Game?"

Kre'e nodded.

She thought about the graves on Endless Scarp and grew angry, but Kre'e said, "There are many ways to starve. You can starve sitting or walking. Silent or amused."

She started to object, then remembered her own laughter, and was silent.

"And there are places beyond laughter," Kre'e said casually. "One of them is the valley. Another is hate."

Four days later, and halfway up the mountains, she understood. They sat together on a ledge of rock, watching the last rays of the sun sweep the plain, and it seemed to her that the desert glowed with life. Where there is life in barrenness, there is hope for all life. Where there is hatred, there is hope for love.

She sighed, leaned back, and stared across the desert toward the west. The view from here was much better than the view from Endless Scarp.

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Films

BAIRD SEARLES

Little Screen Blues

By the time this column sees print, the 1978-'79 television season will be well over. Not that it didn't seem well over almost before it began, both generally and specifically apropos the concerns of this column.

Generally, TV programming has again become that "vast wasteland" it was described as being 20 years ago. The shows, and even more indicatively, the commercials, are mindless, using and aimed at nitwit stereotypes. There are, however, maybe a few more oases in the wasteland than there were (mostly on PBS) and a ray of hope in the fact that an outside poll (as opposed to a network snow job) has said that viewing is off substantially, indicating that even the general public isn't being satisfied.

As for fantasy and science fiction programming in particular, this season seemed more ambitious than the usual, maybe only because of all the brouhaha surrounding the advent of *Battlestar Galactica* as one of the most expensive series ever made. A blatant imitation of *Star Wars*, in look at least, it proved once again that an open-ended series sooner or later runs out of steam. In this case, it was very much sooner (about half way into the initial episode), but I still hold that the beginning hour-and-a-half had fine moments and good ideas and, to put it as uncondescendingly as possible, it's probably great fun for the younger generation.

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(Also by the time this sees print, the movie made from that half-inspired first episode — with some additions such as "sensurround" — will probably have opened. I can see it being jolly good fun.)

Then there's *Mork and Mindy*. The sit of this sitcom is the startlingly unoriginal idea of the alien who lives among humans, and how he views our quaint folkways. This has always been a favorite device of the mainstream writer using an s/f idea as a vehicle for his own views, either seriously *(The Man Who Fell to Earth)*, or satirically *(Visit to a Small Planet)*.

Here it is played for laughs; at least that seems the general approach judging by the laugh track. For the most part, I find the humor tired and/or obvious. I do admit that Robin Williams (who plays the alien, Mork) can be very funny when given his head, at which times he does manage to suggest an oblique zaniness that comes from elsewhere. The trouble is that this happens too infrequently to save matters.

Would you venture a guess as to who might have been the best-selling fantasy author in the U.S. in the 1930s? Without any hard core figures at hand, I would still lay odds on a writer named Thorne Smith. Who? I can just hear you say.

Does the name Topper ring a bell? Ah, now we're getting somewhere, thanks to a not-so-hot TV series adapted from Smith's *Topper*, about a respectable gentleman haunted by two very sophisticated and madcap ghosts, the Kirbys.

Most of Smith's work was of that ilk — a fantasy device (the Fountain of Youth, the return of the gods of Olympus, an acting witch) used as the basis for wacky, very '30s situations that were for the time, risqué. His most daring novel had the personalities of a squabbling young suburban couple transferred into the other's body; the results were predictably riotous.

Turnabout, as it was called, was made into a film in 1940, and tried to make its point by cross dubbing the couple's voices, which didn't work awfully well. It still worked a hell of a lot better than the second season show this year also based on Smith's novel. The series is played so safe that the couple merely seem like a pair of mild eccentrics compared to what one runs into on the street daily. Maybe the idea is simply untranslatable to screen, or maybe they should have just pulled out all the stops and offended everybody.

Nothing seemed less likely to be any fun whatsoever than a TV series of an hour weekly divided into three segments, all of which would be continuing serials in the style of the old Saturday morning popcorn pushers. All three would end each week with a cliffhanger, and the collective series would be called (surprise!) *Cliffhangers*. But since two of the three seemed to be genre, and since serials have an honor-

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able place in the history of science fiction film, I thought I'd better take a look.

Well, knock me over with a buzz saw! Ya know, they were fun! In one, a 19th-century Western marshal goes through what looks like a petrified garage door and down, down, down in an art nouveau elevator, and discovers a cave chock full of what looks like a left over set from *Logan's Run*. It's "The Secret Empire" and don't ask for a logical explanation. (The above-ground sequences were in glorious black and white.) "The Curse of Dracula" segment is a bit too reminiscent of too many bad vampire films, but still has just a slight camp edge, as does the third, which is straight thriller. For the most part, somehow, they have captured the quality and pace of the old serials; how long they can keep it up is questionable, but I, for one, will check it out next week.

(A nice touch was that on the first show, one section started with part 2, another with part 6, and so on. I shudder to think of the mail from viewers who don't get the joke.)

And, of course, throughout the season, there were the at this point inevitable horde of comic heroes brought to life on your screen (if you can call it life), and lots of TV movies or "dramatic specials" that were not dramatic, special, or even movies, except in the technical sense. Just for example, from the week in which I write, one about a bunch of beasts gone bananas because the ozone layer got hair sprayed too thin, and another with the engaging name of *Gold of the Amazon Women* concerning a gaggle of savage blonde ladies — in prime time, yet. The wasteland grows vaster.

Do we have any hope that the next season will be better? Need you ask?

Coming next month

RICHARD COWPER — "Out There Where the Big Ships Go", a new novelet from the author of "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," and "The Hertford Manuscript"

L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP — "The Sending of Serpents," a new Willy Newbury fantasy.

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Herbie Brennan's new story is the suspenseful account of the investigation of the murder of the beautiful wife of a research scientist, an investigation that gradually leads to a science fiction solution...

Taming of The Shrew

BY

HERBIE BRENNAN

Baker placed a finger in the corner of his eye and rubbed it tiredly. "Don't think the bloody exercises are working."

"No?" Dennison, who was driving, slowed down at a junction, then took a sharp right turn. The big car rolled slightly, even though they were traveling quite slowly.

"Been at them over a week now," Baker said. "I'm still getting headaches every night."

"Have to go back to your glasses then," Dennison said. He was a big, stolid man who thought in black and white. He had never had a minute's eye trouble in his life.

Baker sighed. "I don't think coppers should wear glasses. Sort of thing takes away from your image. People look at you and think you're soft." He eased his bulk slightly in the seat. "Theory's sound enough so far as I can see. Your eyesight doesn't go because there's anything wrong with the lens. Goes because the muscles get lazy, pull the eyeball out of shape." He sniffed. "So if you exercise the muscles, your bloody eyesight should come back again, shouldn't it?"

"That's the theory," Dennison agreed.

"Only trouble with it," Baker said, "is it doesn't work. Been exercising my eyes like a lunatic for seven days and I'm still half blind without my glasses. And I'm still getting headaches every night."

"Maybe something else is causing the headaches," Dennison grinned.

Baker glanced at him, then caught his meaning and grinned back. "With a wife like Doris? You must be joking!"

"They say the quiet ones are the worst," Dennison told him. Ahead, the lights changed to amber and he slowed obediently.

As they waited for the green, Baker

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leaned back and closed his tired eyes. "What do you reckon, Harry?"

"What do I reckon about what, Tom?"

"This villain we're going to see."

"Hirsig? Sounds like your high-powered intellectual to me. See his qualifications, did you? And his bleeding background!"

Without opening his eyes, Baker murmured, "Just wondering if you thought he really did kill his wife."

"That's what we're going to find out, isn't it?" Dennison remarked cheerfully.

"Funny place to live," Baker said as Dennison returned to the car after opening the gates.

"Bit far out of town all right," Dennison agreed. The motor had cut and he started it again.

"Far out's right. Miles from the research station."

"Is it?" The car had a low-slung exhaust system, and Dennison was maneuvering so the gate's ground stanchion would not catch it.

"Oh, aye," Baker said. "Station's right over on the other side."

They drove between trees, then shrubs. The house came into sight quite suddenly.

"Nice place," Dennison remarked. "Must cost a bob or two to run."

"Your money," Baker told him. "Your money in bloody taxes going on government research to keep lads like Hirsig in the lap of luxury. Ever think of that, Harry? *Your* money." He glanced through the side window at a well-kept rose bed. "And mine," he added sourly.

"It's still a nice place," Dennison said mildly. "Nice and old-fashioned. Always imagined scientists living in these funny new places, all glass and chrome and electric eyes."

"I've always fancied a place in the country." Baker said. "Nothing this size, of course. Just something big enough for Doris and me when the kids have all gone off. Not that I could afford anything bigger anyway."

"That's the difference between scientists and policemen," Dennison told him.

Baker, whose mind was elsewhere, said, "What is?"

"Money," Dennison nodded. "That's the bloody difference — money."

Baker leaned across to poke him on the shoulder. "And brains, Harry. Don't forget that, will you? This boy has more brains than you and I put together." He stared up at the house and they drove into the courtyard. "I wonder if he's brains enough to get away with it."

Dennison glanced at him. "If there was anything to get away with. We don't know for certain it was murder yet; doesn't exactly look like it."

"*I* know it was murder, Harry. *I* know he did it. Got a nose for these things, I have." He grinned and opened

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the car door. "That's the difference between inspectors and bloody half-assed sergeants."

Baker, whose image of scientists was molded on Einstein, disliked Hirsig instantly. The man was a smoothie, properly polite, properly sorrowing, properly subdued. He gave off the feeling he was made of plastic.

"This is Sergeant Dennison," Baker said after they had shaken hands. He looked around the room. Rather nicely got up, with more books than anybody decently deserved to own. Without his glasses he could not make out the titles, but they looked like classics, most of them in expensive collector's editions.

"Nice library," Baker said after Hirsig and Dennison had gone through their own formalities. "Read them all, have you?"

"I'm afraid I don't have all that much time for reading, Inspector," Hirsig said. He looked faintly surprised that the conversation should open on books.

"Mind if I sit down?" Without waiting for an answer, Baker sank into one of the black leather armchairs, a sight more comfortable than anything he had at home. He blinked to take some of the grit out of his eyes. "Well, I expect you know why we're here, Dr. Hirsig."

Hirsig nodded. "I assume it has to do with Anna."

"Your wife, sir, that's right." He stared at Hirsig, bitterly regretting the fact he had not worn his glasses. Not much you could tell from a suspect when his expression blended into a blur. He sighed, then realized suddenly he had better go through the motions just in case his intuition might have slipped. "I'm really sorry to have to bother you at a time like this, sir. Unfortunately some things just can't wait."

Hirsig nodded again. "I appreciate that, Inspector. Although I must confess I was surprised to hear the police were involved. I know the rabies problem is pretty serious, but I somehow imagined any inquiries would be carried out by the Health Authorities."

"Oh, aye," Baker said. "It's serious all right. Another outbreak in Birmingham according to this morning's news. Did you hear it? Rotten disease. But then you'd know all about that, wouldn't you, sir?"

If Hirsig realized it had been a snide remark, he did not show it. "Yes, it was quite horrendous. Poor Anna died in agony."

"Suppose you were quite cut up about it," Dennison remarked abruptly.

Hirsig glanced at him in surprise. "Yes. Yes, I was." He frowned. "What a curious thing to ask."

"Not really," Baker put in. "You see, sir, Sergeant Dennison has access to our files on the case."

"Files?"

"Oh, we poke about a bit, sir. Poke

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about. Have a look at this and that. Sometimes we come across...well, you know, personal details."

So far as Baker could make out, Hirsig's face went wooden. "So you know the difficulties I had with Anna, do you?"

Baker sighed. "We do, sir. We do indeed. Not that it's necessarily any of our business, of course. What a woman gets up to is her own affair, usually. So far as the police are concerned, that is. Her husband might see it different. Not that that's necessarily any of our business either. But you never know, do you?"

"I'm afraid I don't quite catch your drift," Hirsig said coldly.

"Not sure I have a drift as such, sir. More thinking aloud at the moment, you understand. My trouble is I'm not as young as I used to be. That has a lot of drawbacks. You can't quite get a grip on new ideas for one thing. The Permissive Society, for instance. That's what they're calling it now, isn't it? And — what's it called? — Women's Liberation. It's all changed attitudes, of course. Or seems to be, though you can't believe everything you read in the papers. I mean, sir, how would you take it if you found your missus was having it off with another man? Now me, I'd take it badly. But then, as I say, I'm getting on and I've a lot of old-fashioned ideas." He looked at Hirsig expectantly.

Before Hirsig could answer — if he was going to answer — Dennison said, "If I found my missus was playing away, I'd feel like strangling her. I really would."

"See what I mean?" Baker remarked. "Harry's a lot younger than I am and he doesn't buy these new fangled ideas either. He'd feel like strangling her. What would you feel like, Doctor? Something similar, would you?"

"Inspector Barker —"

"Baker," Baker corrected blandly.

"Inspector Baker," Hirsig began again, "I frankly resent the tone of your questions. You've obviously learned about my wife's...infidelity. God alone knows why you want to find out my attitude towards it. My wife is dead now, remember. She died in a particularly horrifying way. Whatever I felt before, you can scarcely expect me to —"

Baker held up his hand. "You're right, sir. I do apologize. Tactless of me — totally tactless. Comes of being in the force too long, I expect. Perhaps if I could ask you a few questions, we can get the whole thing cleared up and done with, and we won't have to bother you again. How does that sound?"

"Admirable," said Hirsig coldly. He walked past the inspector and sat down opposite in another of the armchairs.

Baker dug into his side pocket and produced a battered notebook. He flicked through the pages for a moment, then stopped. "More checking out what we already know, really. Just

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to be sure. Mrs. Hirsig first started to show symptoms on the 4th, was it? About three weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"You knew she'd been bitten then?"

"No, not then."

"The wounds were fairly obvious," Baker said.

"I hadn't seen her for a few days."

Baker nodded in a vaguely sympathetic manner. "But you knew it was rabies when the sickness started."

"That was obvious."

"Yes. Yes, indeed. And with all the publicity, it would be the sort of thing you'd be on the lookout for, wouldn't it?" Baker scratched his nose. "Only natural really. She hadn't been vaccinated, of course?"

Hirsig shook his head. "No. Nor I for that matter."

"Well, no, that's understandable too," Baker said. "They don't reckon it's a good thing unless there's an outbreak in your area." He paused, then added casually, "What bit her?"

Stonily, Hirsig said, "The doctors said it must have been a smallish rat."

"And she never told you? Never mentioned it? You'd imagine a rat bite would be something you'd mention. Especially a woman. Most women are afraid of rats."

"As you've obviously found out, Inspector, my wife and I were not on the best of terms. In point of fact, she told me very little about anything."

"I see, sir." Baker wrote something in the notebook, then stood up. "Well, I don't think we need be bothering you any further, sir. Routine inquiries, but they have to be done." He smiled, with a limited degree of warmth.

"I'll show you out, Inspector."

"No need for that, sir — we'll find our own way." He reached the door and paused. "You will be here, sir — in the country, I mean — if we need you again?"

"Are you likely to need me again? I thought this was just routine inquiries."

"Well, routine enough," Baker said. "So far anyway. But it never does to take these things for granted, does it, sir? Not in a case like this."

"What do you mean: 'Not in a case like this'? It's a public health matter, isn't it?"

"Officially, yes, sir." Any trace of warmth drained from Baker's eyes. "But I've decided to treat it as murder." He smiled again. "At least for the time being." He nodded. "Until I'm sure."

In the car, Baker said, "You don't think I laid it on too thick, do you?"

"The silly bugger act?" Dennison shook his head. "He wouldn't know the difference. Struck me as an arrogant git, frankly. Probably thinks coppers don't know their arses from their elbows."

A little later, Dennison said, "Still think he did it?"

"He did it all right," Baker said with certainty. "The problem is figuring out how."

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The panelling in Baker's office was stained dark with grime and years of pipe smoke. Dennison found him seated staring through the window, an open folder on his lap. He was wearing his glasses again.

"Given up the exercises?" Dennison remarked.

Baker turned to look at him blankly.

"For your eyes," Dennison prompted.

"Decided I needed my full faculties for this one, Harry," Baker told him. "Besides, I got to thinking: it isn't whether you look soft that counts; it's whether you *are* soft."

"And you're not?"

"Could still take you with one hand tied, I reckon, boyo." He grinned. "Provided it was your hand, of course." He swung his chair to stare through the window again. "You remember Maynard Fynes?"

Dennison frowned. "A villain, is he?"

"Villain? If he is, they haven't found him out. He's with the bloody Surrey C.I.D!"

"Oh, Duffy Fynes — your old boozing buddy. What about him?" He pulled up a spare chair and sat down.

"Know what he was before he was a copper? Know what he did for a living?"

Dennison shook his head. "No."

"Bred mice, " Baker said. "Professional mouse breeder, I swear to God. Big galvanized drum in the garage. Used to feed them all sorts of rubbish — just lagged it in. He sold them to laboratories at a shilling each, fiver a hundred. Made a good living too, so he tells me. Doesn't take you long to knock up a hundred mice."

"Always wondered what labs do with all those mice," Dennison remarked.

"Wondering that myself. Fancy nipping out to take a look-see?"

"The research station?" Dennison asked at once. "Hirsig's place?"

Beker nodded soberly. "That's what I was thinking, Harry."

"Want me to go out on my own?"

"Not bloody likely — I enjoy seeing how the other half lives."

Dennison scratched his armpit. "That place is under the Official Secrets Act. Think they'll let us in?"

"We're the bloody Law, Harry," Baker said, blowing himself up. "Investigating a murder too. I'll make a couple of phone calls."

"That's another thing," Dennison said uneasily. "You sure it really is murder? Tell the truth, I thought you were pushing it a bit when you mentioned murder to Hirsig."

"What do you think it was?" Baker asked seriously.

"Told you at the start, Tom: looked like another rabies case to me. God knows, there's enough of it around."

"Not in this bailiwick, there isn't."

"That doesn't say much, does it? There wasn't any in Britain at all until those bloody greyhounds were smug-

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gled in. Rats travel. Could have been one traveled from an infected area."

"If it was a rat that bit her," Baker said.

"What's it say in the P.M. report?" Dennison asked.

"It says she was infected by something like a rat bite. You know bloody well what it says."

"There you are then," Dennison shrugged.

Baker walked over to the office door, opened it and shouted, "Any hope of a cuppa, Fred? Two rather — Harry's in here with me." As he walked back to his desk, he said, "It was only routine when the first report came in, but it still smelled off to me. Don't know why. Tell you the truth, I thought something might come up in the post-mortem, but it didn't. I was going through the report again when you came in." He nodded to the folder on the desk. "Rabies, all right, no doubt of that. Scarring on the thigh, indicative of her having been bitten by a rodent or similar small animal. That's what it says. Inside thigh. Inside left thigh. That's a funny place to get bitten by a rat, isn't it?"

"Don't see why," Dennison said. "Rats run up your leg."

"Like hell they do! Rats get offside sharpish if you get within a hundred yards of them. It's only when you corner one of the buggers that you're in trouble. Or tread on it accidentally. Even then it'll bite you on the ankle — it won't run up your leg. It's not the slums you're talking about here, you know. None of your starving rats here. It's bloody upper-class suburbia. Not exactly crawling with the brutes, and any that might slip in don't go about attacking humans. Not up the inside thigh they don't."

"Maybe she was lying down," Dennison suggested. "In bed or something."

"Maybe she was, Harry. Maybe she was. Maybe there was a rat in the bed. Not likely, but possible. Maybe she sat on the sodding thing and it bit her." He pushed his glasses back up on his nose and glared. "But there's a problem with that. You frighten a rat and it bites you once and runs like hell. Startled reflex action. This rat bit her over and over. 'Several times' the report says. That's old Trewsdale and his bloody Welsh understatement: it damn near savaged the whole of her inside thigh by the look of the photographs. Rats just don't behave like that."

"This one was rabid," Dennison said.

"You think that explains it?"

"It could," Dennison nodded.

"I don't," Baker said. "I don't think it explains it at all." He looked up as a constable came in carrying two mugs of tea. "Thanks, Fred — leave them on the desk." Then to Dennison: "I think there's something wrong. I think our Anna Hirsig was got at. And if she was got at, then it's murder." He sighed. "You have to admit I was right about the girl herself. You read what she was like in the file. Didn't I tell you that's

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the type she'd be?"

"I'll give you that, Tom. A right bitch by the sound of things."

"A bitch and a beauty," Baker said. "Be amazed how many beautiful bitches get themselves done over sooner or later, Harry. Says something about society, that does."

"When are we going over to the research station?" Dennison asked.

"Soon as we finish this tea," Baker said.

TWO

It was five days and a lot of effort after he finished the cup of tea before Baker managed access to the research station. Even then he could only swing it for himself; clearance for Dennison, he was told blandly, could take anything up to a further month.

"I think the real trouble is the way you look," he told Dennison in the car. "Can't say I blame them. Villainous-looking sod like you would give the guards the jitters."

Dennison grunted and accellerated to pass a truck.

"Even had to sign a statement under the Official Secrets Act," Baker remarked. "Swore not to reveal anything I might see or hear about the place." He scowled. "Know something? I can't even use any of it in court without their bloody permission."

"Whole world's run by civil servants, Tom," Dennison commented.

"You're right," Baker agreed sourly.

As they reached the tall gates, Dennison said, "Plan to smuggle me in? Or is it just chauffeur duty this time round?"

"Just drop me here, Harry. I'll see if I can handle this one on my own." Baker hesitated, his hand on the car door. "Tell you what, though. You might nick down to the pub in the village, have a couple of pints and chat up the locals. Never know what you might pick up."

"Might even pick you up when your stint's finished, eh?" Dennison grunted.

Baker grinned broadly. "There's that to it. I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours. Have them ring you when I'm about ready. Try not to get pissed since you're driving." The grin faded as he opened the door and patted his pockets. "Hope to God I've remembered all my passes."

"Two hours then," Dennison called. "Try not to keep me hanging about on the taxpayers' time."

Baker waved vaguely and ambled towards the gate guard, who was watching them with more curiosity than suspicion.

The research station was a series of modular buildings designed by an architect with a fixation on glass and stainless steel. It looked very clean, very scientific and deadly dull. Baker's current guide, a Dr. Edwin Brockman according to his breast pocket, would have fitted much the same description.

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"Are you interested in security?" he asked Baker brightly as they headed across a tightly manicured lawn.

For an instant Baker had the wild impression the man was about to sell him insurance. Then the penny dropped. "Not really what I'm here for, sir."

Brockman looked distressed. "I'm sorry. I just thought that in your profession...." he trailed off.

In a moment of rare sympathy, Baker said, "Well, I'm interested, of course. As you say, sir, a professional interest."

Brockman brightened instantly. "We have guards on every corridor, you know. Every one. Along with electronic systems. Beams all over the place. A mouse could hardly get in."

"Talking of mice," Baker said, "what do you use them for?"

Brockman blinked. "I'm sorry, Inspector?"

"Lab mice. Friend of mine used to breed them up in Surrey. I was wondering what you used them for."

For some reason Brockman looked faintly distressed. "As a matter of fact, we don't use many here. Wrong sort of research."

"But when they are used, what are they used for?"

"Oh, this and that," Brockman said vaguely. "But do let me explain about our security procedures. You'll find them quite fascinating. Completely computerized now. The central control can lock every door in the buildings."

"Must be tricky if you need to go to the loo," Baker remarked.

If Brockman caught the irony, he did not show it. "Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Fortunately it doesn't happen very often — except in the drills, and we know when those are scheduled, of course." They reached a door that must have operated on a light beam because it opened of its own accord. There were security men immediately inside, as Brockman had promised. Baker's papers were checked by a machine he took to be a computer terminal. So, to his surprise were Brockman's. Apparently the computer recognized them both, for the guards nodded briefly and waved them on their way. They walked down a featureless corridor.

In an attempt to cut short the security lecture, Baker asked, "What exactly do you do here, Dr. Brockman?"

"Me personally or the station?"

"The station." He knew Brockman would probably have been more eager to talk about his own job, but felt he had humored idiots enough for one day.

"I'm afraid I can't say," Brockman told him. He smiled. "Security, you know."

Baker scowled and lapsed into silence.

The director's office was smaller than he had expected, but the director himself was less of a disappointment. Still not Einstein, but he had the decency to wear a white coat. He was a

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very big man, with broad hands. On instinct, Baker felt he might be likable.

"This is our director, Dr. David Ebling," Brockman said by way of introduction. He smiled again and left, walking, so far as Baker was concerned, into total anonymity.

"Nice to see you, Inspector," Ebling said, walking round the desk to shake hands. He had a soft American accent.

"New York, is it?" Baker asked. He looked around for a comfortable chair but failed to find one. He sat down on a frail, tubular contraption.

"Boston," Ebling said. "Does it still show?"

"Not much," Baker admitted. He glanced around him, more out of habit than anything else.

"I've started to think of myself as English," Ebling said pleasantly. "I've been over here for more than fifteen years now." He sat down behind his desk again, in what looked like a comfortable executive chair. "Still, I don't suppose you came to chat about my background."

"No, sir. No, indeed." Baker put on his blankest expression.

"It's about poor Anna Hirsig, I understand."

"Yes," Baker said. "Mrs. Hirsig, that's right."

Ebling looked at him intently. "Is it true you're treating her death as murder?"

News traveled fast. Baker sighed. "It's true I am. Officially we're not treating it as anything except something that needs a few inquiries. For the Ministry of Health, you understand. The boys at Whitehall still think the rabies outbreaks can be contained."

Ebling obviously picked something up from his voice. "And you don't?"

Baker grinned at him. "I'm only a poor copper trying to do an honest day's work, Doctor. They tell me if they can pin down the carriers in every case, we can vaccinate a ring around the bug. So the lads and me help pin down the carriers." His expression changed. "Seeing we've nothing better to do."

"But something's convinced you Mrs. Hirsig doesn't represent a routine infection?"

The interview was getting out of hand. Baker said, "We'll see. Dr. Hirsig works here, of course?"

Ebling nodded. "Yes."

"At what?"

"He's a research scientist."

"What sort of research?"

"I'm afraid that's classified information," Ebling smiled.

"Like hell it is!" Baker told him bluntly. "Took me five bloody days of string pulling to get into this place. Now I'm here, I want answers."

If Ebling was taken aback by the outburst, it did not show. He smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, Inspector, force of habit. Of course I'll tell you everything you want to know."

And maybe you won't, Baker thought. Aloud he said, "I want to

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know what sort of research."

"Dr. Hirsig is a virologist."

Baker stared at him. "So that's what you're up to, is it?"

Ebling nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"I thought you were at some sort of space research. Some sort of tie-up with the Yanks." He remembered and added, "Sorry — Americans."

"We do that too. Analysis of lunar microorganisms, that sort of thing."

"But it's a cover?"

"Not exactly. It's important work."

Baker scowled. "But it's not about to win the next world war."

"Hardly." Ebling looked at him calmly.

"I thought this sort of thing was banned. International agreement years back, wasn't there?"

Ebling sighed. "Inspector, I've told you Dr. Hirsig's specialty. You've drawn certain conclusions from that information about the work of the station. I have not confirmed them. If you went on television tonight and broadcast your suspicions, they'd be denied — officially — within an hour. Furthermore, you could inspect every record and file in this establishment and you wouldn't find a shred of evidence to back your word. Shall we leave it at that? After all, you're not here for political reasons are you?"

"Glad you reminded me," Baker said. "What sort of work does Hirsig do with bugs?"

"That's a little complicated to explain to a layman," Ebling said.

"Do your best."

Ebling moved in his chair. "He's primarily interested in mutating viral strains. The principal method — are you interested in the method? — the principal method is radiation bombardment."

"Does he work with rabies?"

"Several of our best men have been working with rabies since the present outbreak began."

"Hirsig amongst them?" Baker persisted.

Ebling nodded. "Yes."

"Do you know Hirsig well?"

Ebling frowned slightly. "He works here."

Baker decided he was not going to like the director very much after all. "Don't play footsie, Doctor. Do you know him socially?"

"Yes."

"And his wife?"

"I knew Anna quite well — yes."

"Let's just keep talking about Hirsig himself for a moment," Baker said. "What do you think of him?"

"He's an exceptionally skilled scientist. Skilled and careful."

"And as a man?"

"I think he's a prick," Ebling said.

Baker stared at him in obvious surprise.

"Oh, come now, Inspector, I have to presume you've met him. What do *you* think of him?"

"I couldn't argue with your description, sir," Baker said thoughtfully. "I wasn't taken by him."

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"No, I didn't think you would be. At the same time, I don't think he's a murderer."

Baker looked around the room again. "Not saying he is, sir. Not really saying anybody is...officially. Bit like your set-up here, if you get my meaning." He grinned tightly. "What about Mrs. Hirsig?"

"I rather liked her," Ebling sighed. "But then I've always had a weakness for really beautiful women."

"So have a lot of other men, sir. I understand she didn't confine her interest to her husband." Ebling waited without reaction. Baker rubbed his chin. "Took up with one of your lads here, so I believe."

For a moment it looked as though Ebling intended to remain silent, but then he said, "Scientists do tend to form tightly knit communities. Common interests, I suppose. If there is infidelity among their wives, it tends to be with another scientist. A question of..."

"Opportunity?" Baker suggested.

"Yes, exactly."

"You happen to know the lover by any chance, sir?"

Ebling nodded, face expressionless.

"I may want to talk to him," Baker said.

"You already have," Ebling told him softly.

Baker let one eyebrow drift upwards slightly. "Have I really, sir?"

"The man who showed you in. Dr. Brockman."

For the second time that afternoon, Baker stared at him in obvious surprise.

If Baker's picture of scientists was based on Einstein, his picture of laboratories resembled woodcuts of the ancient alchemists. It was another disillusionment. What Ebling called Hirsig's lab was an observation room. It had a smoke-grey carpet on the floor, three chairs, a control panel and a glass wall.

Beyond the glass wall, Baker could see down into a chamber which contained a bench table, several cabinets and various items of incomprehensible equipment. There was also, he noticed, a cage of mice.

"That's where he keeps the bugs, is it?"

"Exactly," Ebling said. "Sealed off and sterile. Many of the strains are quite lethal. We prefer not to have direct contact with them. Nobody enters that room."

"Must make Hirsig's job a bit difficult," Baker remarked.

"Pardon?"

Baker nodded through the glass wall. "If he doesn't go down there, how does he work with the viruses?"

"Oh, I see." Ebling pulled one of the chairs over to the control panel and sat down. "Robots."

A picture flashed into Baker's mind. It was a picture from one of his son's comics. "Robots?"

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"Mmm," Ebling nodded. "Watch this." He activated switches on the control panel.

In the chamber below, a smallish wheeled machine came to life abruptly and skeetered over to one of the cabinets. An arm extended and clawed hand gripped a bottle. Then the machine wheeled directly below them, extended the arm full length and waved.

"Rather fun, don't you think?" Ebling smiled. "Delicate grip too, for handling glass and slides. There's a camera in the bodywork so you can see exactly what you're doing." He pressed another switch and a screen on the panel lit up, treating Baker to the robot's-eye view of the chamber.

"What's in the bottle?" Baker asked. "Some sort of virus?"

Ebling's smile became a little sheepish. "Alcohol, I think. It's programmed to pick alcohol when it's asked to give a fun demonstration."

They went through yet another security check and walked down another featureless corridor.

"Friend of mine used to breed lab mice," Baker remarked. "Hundreds of them in a galvanized drum in his garage. Amazing what you can make money out of."

"I imagine he made quite a lot, judging by the number we use here," Ebling said.

Baker shrugged. "Wife made him stop it. Couldn't stand the thought of them getting out. After that he joined the Surrey Constabulary and his chances of a million really went for a burton."

"Pity," Ebling said seriously. "There's always a need for mice."

Another security check and they were back on the lawn. "Why is that?" Baker asked.

"Why is what?"

"The need for mice. Wouldn't cats or rabbits be better?"

"It's their brains," Ebling told him. He obviously caught Baker's blank look and smiled. "Same basic pattern as ourselves. In many respects, mice are miniature men."

"That so?" Baker asked as they headed towards the gate.

"That was quick," Dennison said as he climbed into the car. "When they called me at the boozer, I couldn't believe it." His breath smelled of beer.

"Quick but useful," Baker said. He settled into the passenger seat as Dennison began a complicated turn. "Hirsig works with rabies virus."

Dennison braked to a stop and turned to look at him. "You having me on?"

"Not on your life I'm not." He smiled smugly. "Still think I'm barking up the wrong tree?"

THREE

Two days later, the case fell apart.

Baker grew so morose that Dennison brought in two cans of beer to go

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with their lunchtime sandwiches.

"Thought I had it, Harry," Baker said. "Thought I had it all worked out nice and neat and pat. All we had to do was pin it on the bugger and charge him. Then this comes in." He glowered at the folder on the desk.

"Drink your beer, Tom," Dennison said. "Make you feel better."

"Nothing's going to make me feel better until that bleeder's behind bars. Mark my word, Harry, he's a villain. I can smell it off him." He drank his beer anyway and said, "Did I tell you about the robot?"

Dennison nodded. His mouth was full of corned beef.

"Don't suppose it's one of their bloody official secrets anyway," Baker said sourly. "When I saw that little bugger, I thought I had it. Honest to God, Harry, I was sure. Right size and everything. Kept asking Ebling questions about it to make sure; must have thought I was nuts on gadgets or something. Everything he said made it fit better. Miniature computer for a brain. Easy programmed. Portable control for emergencies and field operations. Strength factor in the claw. It was all there. Only thing puzzled me was how Hirsig got it out. Expensive bit of equipment, that: they wouldn't want one of their lads carting it home to play with the dog. Next thing is Ebling tells me he did have it out. Took it across to Pennington for some work at their research place there. About the right time too. It all hung together, Harry."

"How?" Dennison asked.

"You ever want to do your missus in, one of those things would make it easy. Paint the claw with something nasty, then program it to grab her hard enough to break the skin. Don't even have to be there. If that thing's smart enough to grab a bottle of alcohol out of a hundred other bottles, it's smart enough to grab the right woman."

"Bottles stand still," Dennison put in. "Women don't."

"No, it could manage all right. I checked with Ebling. You're not talking about some remote-control gadget; you're talking about a miniature computerized robot. You could even program it to mimic an animal bite of sorts. Which is what I thought Hirsig did." Baker sighed. "Judging by the size and arm extension, it would have grabbed her on the thigh as well. And he had access to rabies culture for coating the claw. Set it up, send it in, off you go to the local to establish an alibi, and when you come back she's infected. Neat as pie."

Dennison looked at him cynically. "Come off it, Tom — there's a hole in that one you could drive a horse and cart through."

"What?"

"She'd have told. She didn't die for nearly three weeks after whatever got her got her. Maybe you'd forget to mention a nip from a rat, but if you were attacked by a sodding robot, you'd ring up the newspapers!"

"I thought of that," Baker said.

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"Struck me she might have got her little lot while she was in bed with the lover. Or just getting into bed, more like. Wouldn't want to talk about it then. Too hard to explain what you were up to, see?" He scowled. "Course they wouldn't have known it was infected with rabies then. They might have thought Hirsig just wanted to teach her a lesson. They'd have known it was Hirsig, of course."

"When the symptoms started she turned into a raving lunatic. Who's going to listen?"

"The lover wasn't a raving lunatic," Dennison pointed out. "Still isn't. Why hasn't he said something?"

"How the hell do I know?" Baker snapped abruptly. "Maybe she wasn't with him. Maybe she was just waiting for him, somewhere she shouldn't be. I didn't work out every detail, did I?" His scowl deepened. "Not that it matters anyway."

"Telling me it didn't happen that way, are you?"

"Bloody didn't, according to Trewsdale. Sent a rocket up his arse and told him to check the possibility the wounds weren't inflicted by an animal." He sighed. "Got back a snooty report this morning saying he'd already done that and he's still saying categorically she was bitten by a rodent. No room for doubt, he says. Bang goes another bright idea."

Dennison ate his way efficiently through another sandwich. As he was wiping his mouth, he said, "What's the lover like, Tom?"

"Bit of a twit, I thought," Baker said. "He was the bloke showed me in."

"Takes a wise man to act the fool," Dennison remarked.

Baker blinked. "Know something, Harry? I never talked to him. Meant to, but when I heard who it was and I'd met him, I didn't bother. Wondered why Anna Hirsig would get involved with a bloke that rabbits on about security all the time, but that was about all. Maybe I was too wrapped up in the case against Hirsig."

"Maybe you were," Dennison agreed.

"I still think it was murder, know that, Harry?"

"Do you?"

"It smells like murder somehow. Had that smell in my nose since the day the first report came in." He frowned suddenly. "Funny thing: Brockman told me they didn't have much call for lab mice in the station."

"So?"

"Ebling told me they did, that's all."

"Maybe we should have a chat with Romeo," Dennison suggested.

"Maybe we should," Baker agreed thoughtfully.

It was easier said than done. When they went for Brockman, they discovered he had left the country. There were strong indications he might be in Rome.

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"Ebling was very upset about it," Baker said. "Steinway was worse."

"Who's Steinway?" Dennison asked.

"Station Head of Security. Lot of talk about defectors and official secrets."

Dennison frowned. "Defector? He's only off to Italy."

Baker snorted. "You're still living in the past, you are." He stared gloomily into his glass. "Haven't been listening to all that bull about non-alignment, have you? Believe me, boy, the day Italy went Red was the day the orders started coming in from Moscow."

"Maybe you're right," Dennison admitted. "Want another?"

"Yes," Baker said.

While Dennison was trying to attract the barmaid's attention, Baker downed the remainder of his pint without any obvious sign of enjoyment. "Could kick myself, Harry — know that? He took off the minute he left me in Ebling's office. Must have scared the pants off him when he found we were nosing round into Anna Hirsig's death. Suppose he thought it'd be written off as just another rabies case and left alone." He scowled. "How was he to know I had my hook in Hirsig?"

"Pint of bitter and a mild and bitter, darling," Dennison said to the barmaid.

"Could have had him then," Baker said gloomily. "Only he seemed such a twit. Butter wouldn't melt in his bloody mouth, it wouldn't. Yakking on about security procedures. Should go on the stage, that one — make a bloody fortune as an actor."

"There you are, ducks." The barmaid set the glasses on the counter.

Dennison sighed. "Suppose he must have been at his work if he took off so sharpish."

"Oh, he was at his work all right, Harry. Clever bugger he was too. Too clever by half. I'd have had him if I'd been a bit more thorough."

"You had your teeth into Hirsig," Dennison said.

Baker hefted the fresh pint and swallowed some bitter. "That was the trouble all right. First time in years my nose has let me down."

"But you still think it was murder?"

Baker stared at him in surprise. "Skipped the bloody country, didn't he? First sniff of a copper and he was off like a rabbit, wasn't he? You telling me he's visiting his auntie?"

Dennison shrugged. "Might be coincidence, Tom. Maybe he owes income tax."

Baker set the glass down. "I know how he did it."

This time it was Dennison's turn to look surprised. "You didn't tell me."

For the first time that day, Baker grinned. "Official secret, Harry."

"Oh, for God's sake, Tom —"

Still grinning, Baker said, "Tell you in the car, Harry. This place might be bugged."

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Baker took off his glasses and set them carefully in the glove compartment. He placed the palms of his hands over both eyes like a man far gone in sorrow. "Called 'cupping' this, Harry. Relaxes the eye muscles and improves your sight. Man cured himself of cataract doing this twenty-four hours at a stretch."

Glancing at him, Dennison remarked, "Think I'd rather stay blind."

Baker stopped cupping and put his glasses back on. "Suppose I could always try contact lenses. Trouble is they're supposed to irritate the eyeball if you've sensitive eyes. With my luck, I'd have sensitive eyes."

"You were going to tell me how Brockman did it," Dennison reminded him.

"I was, Harry. I was indeed." He shifted in his seat and stared out through the windshield. "Have to go back to basics. First thing is I was wrong about Hirsig. He didn't do it and he didn't even know it was murder. Anna Hirsig didn't know it was murder either. I was wrong about the robot too, if that's any interest to you. Bloody thing wasn't within a thousand miles of her."

"What did he do — inject the virus?"

"No, Harry, nothing like that. Had to be made look genuine; injection wouldn't do that. No, as Trewsdale said, Anna Hirsig was bitten by a rodent. That's what gave her rabies."

Puzzled, Dennison said, "Then it wasn't murder? That what you're telling me?"

"It was murder all right. As nasty a case as I've ever smelled. That's about the only bloody thing I was right about. Wasn't for that, I'd think I was getting old."

"What did he do then? Lock her in a room with the rat?"

Baker snorted. "Nothing as crude as that, Harry. You're talking about a bloody scientist, you are. One of the boys with the brains. Lock her into a room? No, that wouldn't do at all. She wasn't going to die for three weeks, and he didn't want her saying anything would make the circumstances sound suspicious. Besides, it wasn't a rat; it was a mouse. Little shrew mouse like the ones old Duffy Fynes used to breed, probably. Should have twigged that, all things considered, but I didn't."

"A mouse? Pretty savage mouse, wasn't it?"

"I know," Baker said. "Aren't you interested in the motive?"

"More interested in how he did it. Sounds a right bloody mystery to me."

"It was. But the motive wasn't. She'd decided to stop seeing him, simple as that. Got tired of him, probably. Women do, you know, Harry. Something worth bearing in mind if you were thinking of a bit on the side."

Dennison stopped at a junction, then eased his way out onto the main road. "When do I ever get time for a bit

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on the side? Driving you about all bloody day, amn't I?"

"Just so you know. Ebling knew all about that end of the relationship, but he wasn't about to tell me unless I asked him." His face clouded. "And I wasn't asking him because I thought Hirsig did it. Ebling has a lot to answer for, Harry. Too damn secretive. Led me a right song and dance about what they're actually doing at the station too. I thought it was germ warfare."

"And it isn't?"

"Not even close. They're working on bionic controls."

Dennison looked at him blankly.

"Don't feel bad about your ignorance, Harry." Baker grinned slightly. "Didn't know what it was myself. What started me off was Brockman saying they didn't use many mice and Ebling saying they did. Something off there, Harry. When people start telling different stories, there's always something off, no matter how simple the thing is. So I started wondering why Brockman didn't want us to know about mice. And I started thinking what I knew about Brockman. And the only thing I knew about Brockman was he was interested in security. So I figured out the mice must have something to do with a tight security area. Didn't have a clue what, of course, but I got onto an old pal in Whitehall and chanced my arm. Told him I knew what they were up to with mice at the station and asked him to fill me in on some details I needed. Fell for it right off. Bionic control systems. They're controlling animals by brain implants and radio pulses."

After a moment, Dennison said, "Sounds a bit far out."

"Far out's right. They stick a microminiaturized receiver in the skull and run electrodes into particular areas of the brain. Then they pulse in signals by radio. Send you berserk or give you an erection, neat as pie."

"That's handy," Dennison grinned. He pulled out to pass a bus.

"Not if you can't stop it — and you can't. Make you do damn near anything they fancy, from what I'm told. Or will do soon. Right now, it's still at the stage of experiments with animals. Could tame a wildcat with this system, only shrew mice are cheaper, so they work with them. Know who was the brightest lad in the whole project?"

"Don't tell me," Dennison said. "Brockman."

"Right!" Baker said without enthusiasm. "And it only took him five minutes to convince me he was a twit." He shook his head sadly.

"So he set up controls on a mouse, infected it with rabies and sent it out to do his dirty work? Sounds like something out of science fiction, Tom."

"Tell that to Anna Hirsig," Baker muttered sourly.

FOUR

Dennison strode into Baker's office looking inordinately pleased with himself. "Seen this morning's paper?"

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Baker glanced up. His desk was a chaos of open files. "Haven't had time for breaking wind this morning, Harry, let alone curl up with the paper. This job's not a soft touch like yours, you know."

"Take a breather then and take a look at this. Should make your day."

Dennison dropped the paper on the desk.

Baker picked it up. "This what you want me to read? This thing about May Holland and the cabinet minister?"

"No, it's the bit at the bottom of the page." Dennison perched himself on the edge of the desk. "Remember that business about the scientist's wife — the Hirsig woman? Died of rabies and you thought it was murder. Only the villain you thought did it scarpered before we could pin it on him?"

"About half a year ago," Baker frowned. "No — longer. More like nine months, wasn't it? What was the villain's name? Broadhurst? Broadworth?"

"Brockman," Dennison said confidently. "Now read the bit at the bottom of the page." He jabbed a finger.

Baker opened a drawer and took out a pair of reading glasses. As he put them on, he said apologetically, "Had to stop wearing contact lenses — they were hurting my eyeballs." He bent over slightly to read. Then he looked up at the beaming Dennison. A slow smile spread like sunshine over his own features. "My God, Harry, that's a turn-up! Latest victim of the rabies outbreak south of Naples: Dr. Edwin Brockman, the distinguished British scientist. Bitten by a bloody dog, it says." He bent to read the paragraph again. "Renews your faith in justice somehow, don't it?"

THEODORE STURGEON'S "And Now the News," ISAAC ASIMOV'S "Dreaming Is A Private Thing," JAMES TIPTREE, JR'S "The Women Men Don't See," and ZENNA HENDERSON'S "Ararat" are just four of the more than 20 stories that will appear in F&SF's 320-page October 30th anniversary issue, an instant collector's item! To be sure of receiving your copy, send us immediately the coupon on page 29.

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Felix C. Gotschalk is a psychologist who lives in North Carolina. His short fiction has been published in many magazines and anthologies, and his approach to sf seems totally distinctive; witness...

The Trip of Bradley Oesterhaus

BY

FELIX C. GOTSCHALK

The accordionized Baedeker prospectus about the beach was colorful and complex, and as my parents examined it, they seemed uncertain about our much-heralded July vacation. And, I thought, if our loose-hanging next-door neighbors can blast off for Key West on short notice, why should there be obfuscative detritus littering the stylobate of our own decisional cognition? Why indeed, but the complications of the trip proved to be both real and imagined, the subsequent experience both slapstick and bittersweet, and the memory-trace engrams at once both bland and deeply etched in my 2-year-old mind.

My 18-year-old brother, Marcus, was very tall, very flat-footed, impressively muscled, and, except for a scanty wirebrush beard and a ripe crop of facial zits of optimal purulence, was very much a physical man. He acted cordially sullen about the proposed beach trip, uneasy about being seen with his 50-year-old parents; his 14-year-old sister, Donna; the 5-year-old Downes Syndrome brother, Genghis; and *me*, the 2-year-old superbright brother, the new Baby Jesus-surrogate, the rare and totally outstanding example of supra-humanity here in the calendrical tier of 1980. Of course, Marcus wanted to go to the beach alone, to flex his fresh new independence, to feel the pale straw thatches of axillary hair growing beneath his deltoid caps as his long tanned arms swung in casual arcs, to bobble his wide, nicely squared shoulders, and to search for the scent and spoor of young girls. Donna also fancied herself old enough to go to the beach alone, and she had begged Mother and Daddy not to ruin the trip for her by disallowing her to meet new friends. Genghis (I've

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always thought that name pathognomonically appropriate for a Mongoloid child) enjoyed such experiential high-spots as looking at our fresh tomatoes growing beside the garage and riding in the variable height of the family Citroen to the supermart. So I was certain he would like the idea of a long beach trip. Genghis was not smart enough to realize how unhappy he ought to have felt, what with his basically ugly face and body, not to mention his 32 or so IQ points. His occipital was flattened; he had a case of the galloping blepharitis, two splendidly bedroom-eyed epicanthic folds, and a deeply fissured tongue that seemed devilishly designed to fill all his orthodontic space and to disallow intelligible articulatory speech. But, in timbre, his voice was a veritable bassoon, and he was our own little 47-paired chromosomal, de facto, anthropoid, household pet. We never took him sailing. He couldn't triple-flock the ginnymast anyway, and he kept getting starboard and port confused.

As for me, I had never seen the ocean. I knew that our mountains changed to foothills, plateaus and highlands, then to vast expanses of sandhills, and then came the marvelously flat beaches, the combing, crashing eternity of the ocean waves, and, out a very few miles, the dark abyss of the continental shelf. And I had heard that big brown pelicans flew near the beach, squirting thick whitewash balsts of excreta into the waters and hoarding fish in their beak-pouches — hey, I remember a poem about a pelican — let's see....

A REMARKABLE BIRD IS
THE PELICAN.
HIS BEAK CAN HOLD MORE
THAN HIS BELICAN.
HE CAN TAKE IN HIS BEAK
FOOD ENOUGH FOR A
WEEK.
BUT I'M DAMNED IF I KNOW
HOW THE HELICAN

(Dixon Lanier Merritt, 1879-1988)

We decided to drive to the beach August 8, 1980. Mother packed secret little pillows called Tampax, filmy voile panties, pendulous bra-lacings, and squared stacks of polyester shorts, pants, and tops. Daddy packed threadbare boxer shorts, paint-spotted teeshirts, ancient Tretorn tennis shoes, size-40 Bermuda shorts, and a variety of Bergdorf and Neiman shirts, all esoteric in styling and quality and monstrously overpriced for generic pieces of clothing. Marcus filled his suitcase with jockey shorts, tank shirts, Chicago cassettes, and even slipped in some ribbed Swedish Proximas he had gotten out of a vending device in the restroom of a Holiday Inn two summers ago. Poor, strong, virile, studley Marcus: he had yet to consortially breach the labial folds but had saturate-locus practice in autofrictionating and medial-arc seminal trajectories. Ah, the quiescent hormonal bliss of psychosexual latency at age two! Genghis didn't pack anything. He was like a dog or a

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cat, in that he didn't have any *things:* no chattels, no personal possessions — he didn't even have a security blanket or a teddy bear, and I knew of adults who had both. Wait, Genghis did have a stuffed teddy bear for a few days, but he thought it was alive and a sibling rivalry surrogate. No, wait, he couldn't think that complexly, maybe he didn't like those big black buttony eyes. Who can effectively probe Genghis? I can't. The few times I have tried to get inside his head, I have felt like an Orkin man in a coal chute full of giant, waxy, harmless potato bugs. My own neuronal vines and branches are as taut and itchy as piano wires, and my synaptic filigrees facilitate crispy-crunchy little ionic messages flaring along the tributaries, like anthracite gunpowder in the marrow of resin-impregnated tapers. Genghis's ideational paradigms are like slugs in grease or thick, slow sewage in cast-iron pipes. He is, of course, touched of God.

The trunk of the Citroen filled quickly with our suitcases, the nooks and crannies with beach towels, and then the suitbags lay supine and prone across the top. With some difficulty, we fitted a folding chair atop the mound of Samsonite slabs and Cannon Mills fillers and eased the deck lid down over the pawl and ratchet interlocks. The splendidly eccentric Citroen burst into tentative Francóis ignitionary life, the air suspension system sighed its way down to a languidly sexual 3-inch ground clearance, and we purred up the driveway and out onto the street. We drifted past the spongy Bermuda grass turflawn that Mr. Thomas poured all his energies into every few days, then past the Barber's fescue plots, down past the pool and sauna and squash courts, and onto the commercial strip leading to the freeway. Along this once beautiful street, a taco house now stood next to a bank, and the funeral home adjacent to the Add-A-Room decorator service, followed by McDonalds, Texaco, ad infinita — the whole gloomy line-up of carnival midway enterprises, to variously glut our stomachs with ersatz soya cutlets, carbonated fluids in plastic vials burgeoning with crushed ice, and flaccid potato strips baptized in obscene boiling oil. The auto service stations shot their tall lollypop signs high into the air, so that the yellow and black Reelo signs vied for skyspace with the fierce triangular Citgo, the ancient convex-ribbed Shell, the lofty and arrogant Rockefeller-Exxon, and the crown and scepter of Faisal-Opec. A long block of pizza and taco booths pressed in against the several dumpsters of the Goodwill Industries, and we hissed past great, dilapidated frat houses built in the 1920's and 30's. The bank had repossessed Dr. Victor's mustard-yellow Bora, but his circular driveway still sported an XJ-6, three BMW's, and a puce and metallic-flake van. The Baptist church next to the polo field had been burned in the 1978 denominational riots, and the kids still played in the

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fine phallic tower, now horizontal, like a fallen spear, and covered with graffiti. We cloverleafed our way onto the freeway and shot out over the city in elevated grandeur, the Citroen purring and sighing on the plasticrete ribbons, those ribbons that truly covered much of the city beneath.

We synched in beside a 100-mph beltway, rode the draft of the pace van ahead, and were shunted nicely into the mainstream autobahn. Dad locked the autopilot mechanism in, and we settled back for the high-speed ride, nothing to do but watch or talk, sleep or pluck navel lint, or whatever. Marcus seemed to end every sentence with "whatever," and it was starting to bug us all. Genghis wanted to pick his nose, but he showed very little skill in this rudimentary visuo-motor act. We sped past the airport and saw a shiny blue Concorde burn its way up into the haze. For all its technologic excellence, the craft was obviously a pterodactyl-surrogate, all screaming beak and talons and triangular leathery wings; or maybe it was like the ancient Jap monster Rodan, and it looked like a cobra towing two orange crates. "Opppain! Oppain!" Genghis croaked, pointing at the steeply climbing craft.

The beltway on which we rode was rather like those scary, steam-powered, catapault slides on the decks of old aircraft carriers, and then I felt uneasy about riding on a 100-mph conveyor belt. And now, near the Newark ruins, a new beltway was complete, running all the way to the San Andreas Canyon, and it would turn some 600 mph, and all fitted out with impact neutralizers too, all the riders just as snug as a bug in a rug. We began to drop almost due south, and it was interesting to note that the horizon seemed to be rising all the time. Daddy chewed a big chicle cube that seemed to irritate Mother, and Marcus was plugged into the stereoscreen, oblivious to us in his video mask and huge audio phones. Donna slept, lying on her favorite velour pallet; Genghis chortled and babbled and salivated, and I sat right in the center of the front seat, all safe and encapsulated in an impact bubble. I waved at Daddy, and he prodded the filmy membrane with his finger, smiling at me. We drove right smack down the face of the globe, and the peach orchards rose up all around us, then the peanut fields, stretching away to lush green horizons. Blackwater swamps and tidal marshes appeared, and the air outside grew humid and sulfurous. A certain angle of the sun gave us to know our vulnerability to its more direct rays, and our home in the mountain foothills seemed very far away.

We shunted onto a medial-speed feeder trench, and the endless jumble of beach facilities began to appear, even though the ocean itself was some five miles distant. My 2-year-old cognitive matrices burgeoned with the visual input: fireworks stands, zoos, aviaries, hydro-shoot slides, motels, hotels, rooming houses, trailers,

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kiosks, porta-rooms, arcades and museums. Genghis nodded approval of all these things, his bassoon voice punctuating the air in dull blobs of flat sound. Now we slid nicely off the feeder trench and on to the beachside boulevard. Mother had been strangely silent, but now she began to describe the vast gray-blue ocean to us, pointing to the several small, carefully programmed *tsunamis* cresting in toward the beach, the huge waves topped with skiers and filmy-winged gliders. The incredible density and crowdedness of the buildings impressed me strongly as Daddy defluxed my impact bubble and patted me on the head. I looked through the windshield at the vista of white and pink and pale yellow buildings, and they looked jumbled and interminable, stretching as far as I could see. Their title signs clamored for attention: African Queen, Landmark, Tropicana, Tahiti Tower, Hyatt Shaft, Pirate Cove, Wendover Arms. Top-o-the-Mart, Sandpiper, Starlite, and Ocean Vale. And there were hundreds more, maybe thousands. I began to wonder how so many different catchy little names could have been devised, each one vying for our attention, each connoting its own special cues of territoriality, optimally darkened rooms, thick carpets, color TV, 65-degree F air conditioning, thick walls, heavy undulating draperies, and laissez faire house rules.

Our motel was The Antiqua Arms, and we spotted it, miraculously enough, in the zoom-lens magnified pastiche of visual figure-ground equivocality that blanketed our scanning eyes. We turned into the parking lot, Daddy cut off the car engine, the refrigerated air stopped bathing my face, and it grew hot and humid in just a very few seconds. The man behind the registration desk was a stereotype, but still elusive to characterize. Although the Antiqua was only three or so years old, and really quite plush in decor, the man wore an undershirt and faded jeans, and his potbelly was a dead ringer for a pregnancy bulge. His hair was slatted in washboard curls, almost kinky, and he smiled readily enough, though cautiously, I thought. Daddy presented a credit card voucher, and the man gave him the room key. Then it was back to the already dusty, tired-looking Citroen, the sun close and hot-baking on us, the sand tiny-gritty beneath our feet, and the damp salt breeze reaching in to give us faint rhythmic respite from the heat. The Antiqua was a full five tiers tall, with massive cantilever balconies running the full long depth of the building. Many bright beach towels hung drying over the balconies, and all the deck surfaces were carpeted with red ozite. The steps to the different levels were wide and shallowly angled, so that they were easy and fun to ascend and descend, and the whole place was not at all unlike a concrete bunker of the sort used in warfare. Daddy hefted the two largest suitcases up the stairwells,

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Marcus carried two others, and Donna carried a large bag filled with snacks and fruit. We could hear the surf and see the whitecaps from the landings as we walked up, and a small plane labored by, towing a banner that read JOIN THE US ARMY NOW. I took Genghis by his fat puffy hand and followed everybody up to the room. We were tired from the drive, so that mediocre lodgings would have looked good to us; but the room was in fact quite nice, with the three low beds covered in yellow corduroy, nicely curlicued headboards for each, large light globes hanging from the low ceiling, and a wide credenza-like chest of drawers opposite the beds. Genghis quickly activated the color TV and watched somberly, as Barbra Stanwyck out-machoed a jutty-jawed ranch foreman in a head-to-head talkdown. Now we were all together in the small room, and it became a matter of shifting and changing Ardsleyan territories, of re-defining, delimiting, and acquiescing cubic inches of Lewinian life-space, of wondering where to put your wallet and your beachball, whether to live out of full suitcases or to empty them into drawers, whether to sit down or sprint for the surf, to take a nap or change clothes, or to chew gum or drink beer. The room was dark and suggested sexual intimacy. Donna went into the bathroom, and emerged, scant seconds later, in her bikini, which looked like a series of handkerchiefs knotted together to cover buds and clefts. Mother immediately protested both Donna's appearance and plan, fearful of her being abducted and never seen again. Marcus grudgingly agreed to watch out for Donna and changed into his swim trunks much slower than I knew him capable of. Daddy and Mother lay down on their bed and looked blankly at the ceiling, and they made not the slightest move to do anything. Then Daddy fell asleep as usual, his facial tonus all collapsed, his mouth open, and he looked dead, but he snored loudly. Mother also closed her eyes, and I began to think, hey, you all, I'm only two years old, and I'm supposed to baby-sit this docile monsteroid Downesian brother of mine, and my feet don't quite reach the floor when I want to slide off the bed, and I'm getting hungry, and I want to go down and see the big blue and white ocean and pick up shells and watch fiddling crabs and rubbery-beaked pelicans and maybe run right into the ocean, so I can taste the salt spray and feel the hydraulic pull of the tides around my ankles. Then Mother began her little-kitten snore, and even Genghis's already ptotic lids started to close. On the TV screen, a flaring yellow TR-7 moved slowly across a black and white diamond floor, and Genghis rolled back into his favorite *mortis de rigor* sleeping position, a flaccid pile of quasi-homo sapiens protoplasm there on the lovely shag floor.

I slid off the bed and onto the carpet and wriggled my bare feet in the

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forest of polyester loops. I walked past the beds and into the kitchen area. The small refrigerator yielded a fuzzy peach, not yet cold enough to savor in that ice-flake connotative way, and there was lots of beer and olives and ham and cheese there in the cold freonic darkness. I grabbed the peach and bit it, and the fuzzy contact made me want to sneeze. So I rubbed it in my palms a lot and decided I would go and see the ocean by myself.

The world looks tall and imposing from the disadvantage point of the 2-year-old, even one like me, who has an all-out sensory tract and 1600 IQ points. The doorknob was above my eye level, but easy enough to turn. The door was heavy but I am strong. The refrigeration of the room was quite a bit different from the wet heat on the outside balcony, and the breeze began at once to blow my long hair into my eyes. I closed the door and walked along the red-decked balcony and down the stairwells to the ground level. The heat positively filled the air, as if it were water, rising up my throat and chin, under my ear lobes, and it even seemed to infuse my eyes. Thank goodness, the wind blew regularly. My pupils constricted into pinpoints as I squinted against the whiteness and brightness of everything. Rounding a white concrete corner, I came across a wooden milk carton all filled with oil cans, beer bottles, and amphetamine canisters. Then came the kiddie pool and, behind the diving board, a long and detailed plaque of rules. I found out later that both the pool and the laundry room were monitored by TV cameras. Now I walked past rows of cars and vans and cycles, past a brass-green shower pylon beside the pool, and onto a brave and often-trampled little redoubt of sand tufted with tenacious creeper grasses. The ridge rounded off to loose deep sand for a few yards, and then the flat wet beach showed itself to me. The maze of umbrellas and chairs and people contaminated my view of the ocean, and I immediately resolved to return when the beach was deserted. But the ocean was still awesome in its size and power, and my data banks suggested that the world itself is really one huge ocean, broken here and there by islands we call continents. I spotted Donna and Marcus in the surf and ran down to them. The hydraulysis of the water was ineluctable, and I quickly came to know that I was but a cork, even in the shallowest lappings of the waves. Marcus shouldered me and the view was grand. My eyes opted to 20x visual mag, and I tried to scan far enough out to bridge the undersea plateau, the escarpment, the plain, then the *rise*, and *Bermuda(!)* and the seamounts beyond. Donna quickly took advantage of the moment to jog away, loping lazily along the beach, her feet making shallow splashes at the fringe of the ebbing tides. The water pressure was 14.7 psi on the surface, which I thought was a lot; *but* in the deep Pa-

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cific and Caribbean trenches, where the water goes down six miles, the pressure is 16,124 psi, which is equivalent to about one elephant psi. I think it most extraordinary that water cannot be *compressed* — what a salient truism! An altogether pure and right maxim of towering truth. Thou mayest not take a cubic foot of water and squeeze it into a cigar box or a safe or a tiny cube. Imagine a reciprocating piston in a cylinder filled with more water than it could hold — hah hah hah — so that the piston always had to move to escape the extra water — Hooray, a perpetual motion machine! One of the new B-1 jet planes whistled overhead, and I thought what fun it must be to be a 21-year-old pilot and fly a thirty-million dollar toy at mach 3.0! Marcus put me back on the slick wet sand, and I saw Daddy and Mother and Genghis plodding through the deep sand toward us. They were laden with the basic accoutrements necessary to foster first- and/or second-degree sunburns on their fish-belly white bodies. In a few minutes, Daddy paid the lifeguard $15 for a faded green and yellow umbrella, driven far down into the sand, and we established our little circular plot of merciful shade under the flaming fire-cones of the sun. The beach towels flapped and folded over in the breeze as we positioned them on the ground, and Genghis promptly poured a handful of sand on the beautiful velour surface. Mother rubbed some kind of icky oil all over me, smeared a strip of white cream down my nose, and told me that the sun wouldn't bother me at all. She and Daddy smeared each other with the same stuff, the fatty globules filling the pores, and thereby disallowing perspiration. Thus encapsulated in slick, oily, smothery isomorphs, they sprinted for the 86 degree F salt water. Genghis lumbered after them, looking for the world like a miniature Sumo wrestler. Perhaps it is the feeling of relative weightlessness in the buoyant 3.5 salted sea that affords us somesthetic pleasure, but it is the sight of the endless waves that focuses our delight. Daddy dove cleanly into the waves again and again; Mother swam with surprising skill *and headed straight out to sea!* But then she turned easily and swam back, and I was immensely relieved. Marcus floated on a fabric raft and was borne along for several good rides that carried him high onto the recesses of the beach adjacent to the deep sand. Donna returned with a new friend: a pug-faced boy who looked wholly incorrigible. His nose was raw-red, his hair a thatch of dirty orange straw, and his pig eyes looked singularly predatory. He was well muscled and compactly built, and Donna seemed charmingly assured in the little doe role-for-the-day with him. The boy gave his name as Jaybird, and I got the distinct feeling of that being an alias.

Overconfident after several successful forays into the surf, I neglected to keep my mouth adequately closed

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and got a taste of salty, magnesium, sulfur, and calcium ocean. In my reflexive gag, little did I know that my own body fluids were remarkably like sea water and that I may have re-enacted an evolutionary milestone, in which organisms rejected the fluid environment for the gaseous.

Our bodies were now coated with drying salt, gummy oil residue, the pores striving for oxygenated release, our respiratory rates heightened; and now the sand began to blow a bit, so that the tiny silica cubes rode the salt and oil layer like gritty dust on flypaper. And still we cavorted in the endless phalanxes of curling waves and lay like greased veal filets in the muggy-hot waterfall of the sun, then running along the beach, confident we could sprint forever, and back into the restorative waters yet again. Plunges into the surf reinforced the fun of terrestrial action, and all the running and jumping and cartwheeling served to draw us again and again into the sea. After a few quick hours, I began to feel holistically tired, and as the sun finally kissed the horizon, it reminded me of a glowing coal, sizzling onto a surface of cold smooth pudding. My eyelids began to drop, and I felt sodden with a delicious fatigue.

We gathered up the towels and blankets, the camera and radio, chair and binoculars, and then the tote bags filled with creams and oils, and headed back toward the massive cement-bunkered white building that was our home for these next few days. Our steps were slow, and it was a real effort for me to lift my feet high enough out of the deep sand and then up the worn grassy ridge onto the gritty asphalt parking lot. We straggled across, to the shower pylon, and stood beneath the icy purity of this new type of water. Although probably sulfur-noxious to the taste, this freezing municipal elixir was at once both a shock and a dramatically extrinsic cleanser. How my very bowels contracted under the spray! All over my body, electron radii flicked to smaller concentrics, while the protons retained their proud hubs of centrality. Now the breeze fairly blew *through* me, I was light and porous and sieve-like. I flowed in the air and the air was beneficent. Back in our room, the refrigerated air felt wonderful on our bodies; then, in defiance of the simplest survival instincts, we all took *warm* showers, soaping our bodies with glycerol and papaya bars that looked good enough to eat. Now, luxuriously clean, patted and rubbed, buffed and stroked by thick fresh towels, we began to dress for dinner. Anesthesia might just as well have been in the air, or perhaps chloral hydrate in my Gatorade, for as I snuggled ever so briefly under the yellow corduroy bedspread, the 30-inch color screen blooming with Kitty Carlyle in boa feathers and diamonds, and my underwear morning-fresh, I closed my eyes, and fell immediately asleep: a deep, sweet, gelatinous balm of obliteration. As if in ex-

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act replay, Genghis collapsed like a disjointed puppet right smack on the floor and began to snore in his oddly resonant, chittering way. Donna disappeared with the new boy, Jaybird, and Marcus went out again to look for girls. Nor were my venerable two-score-and-ten parents untouched by fatigue. They decided to watch the television panorama for awhile, drew the covers up under their vestigially wrinkling chins, and readily succumbed to the Morpheal anointment already claiming Genghis and I — or is it Genghis and me? While Donna and Jaybird screamed in fright and excitement on five consecutive roller coaster rides, the four of us dreamed of flying and stumbling and singing and screwing.

The sweet infusion of sleep lasted three full hours, and when I came awake at 9 p.m., the TV screen was alive with piston-legged high jumpers, rolling over 7-foot-high bars onto inflated silken airbags. Mother and Daddy came groggily awake, and we were driven by hunger out into the night to search for restaurants.

The diverse ways in which humanoids satiate their appetites for food are many and desperate, and I think it tellingly true that one man's meat is another's poison. After joining the slow lemming-rush of traffic along the beachside boulevard for many blocks, we fell capricious heir to a parking slot in front of a Chinese restaurant. The wheels of the Citroen seemed fully castered as we silently occupied the precious opening, and we entered yet another darkened world, this time one of paper lanterns, small circular tables, and smiling Chinese waiters in white tunics. I could not help but smile in empathy as our waiter's eye-folds met in brief and inscrutable contact with those of Genghis. Impossible, but I thought Genghis felt that here were members of his very own tribe.

We ate marvelous small pieces of pork and shrimp, rice in little silver tureens, beautiful tasty peas, celery, beansprouts, watercress and bamboo stalks, leeks and tiny onions, spinach soup, prawns and bean curd, won-ton and liver strips — in all, a mystically unobtrusive and yet quite tasty repast. Genghis grunted his way through carefully selected bits of pork and rice, examining each piece, as if he was going to prod it first, to make sure it was dead. Donna had left a note back at the motel, and Mother was angry but not too worried about her going off with Jaybird and his parents. Throughout the meal, I marveled at the bite-size food pieces, the chopsticks, the soup served last, the absence of dessert, and the silence of the diners as they ate. Daddy asked the waiter about Bird's Nest Soup, and the waiter smiled his knowledge of the term. I remember the check as $19.22 and thought that excessive, but who is to price the wealth of such gustatory and spiritual satisfaction.

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We had very often wolfed down Big Macs, chocolate shakes, and cherry pillows at $1.46, but I had just as often wondered about the adequacy of such a diet.

Back in our shag-epithelia uterine cave, we watched the Olympiad Games until 2 a.m. Donna was in and out every half-hour or so, at one point insisting that Daddy and Mother step out onto the balcony to meet Jaybird's parents. Marcus came in about midnight, swaying boldly, under the influence of seven 10 oz. beers. Mother seemed disturbed and Daddy seemed proud. It was 3 before the lights were out, and we oriented ourselves for sleep, and contra-incest pairings: viz., Marcus and Genghis in bed #1, Donna and I in #2, and the 50-year-old lovers in #3.

Four hours later, and 15 miles away, a bulldozer blade cut into a natural gas pipeline, and a light plane fell onto an electrical substation. My young mind was later able to process this dual coincidence, but, at the time, the loss of gas and electrical power on the entire beach was a nuisance that grew into near catastrophe. The icy breath of the air conditioner ceased, and it grew wondrous hot by 8 a.m. Genghis could not deal with the dead TV, and he sat patiently before it, convinced that the magic pictures would soon appear on the silent gray-mirror screen. The water pressure died away rapidly, and Daddy reached into the small, dark refrigerator and began drinking beer at 9. The phone lines were so clogged that news of the dual accidents was very slow in dissemination. The ice-making machines on decks I and IV were small-shoveled empty of their precious cold nuggets by 10 a.m., and then the runs on the vending machines began. Thankfully, the devices had mechanical back-up systems. The coin-lots slots and delivery mechanisms quickly jammed under the deluge of hurried 25-cent pieces, and the manager had to open the door of the machine for the frenzied people to get their drinks. Pop-top cans are a questionably-worthy invention in my book, and now they showed a streak of malfunctioning that was eerie to behold. The metal tongues clung tenaciously to their faultily punched template ridges, the pull rings broke, and more than one finger got a stinging cut from the stubbornly curling tongues. It was too hot to stay in the rooms, and it was fearfully hot outside. The pumps at the kiddie pool were not working, and then the breezes from the great green-gray ocean died away, and the waters subsided into gentle rollers. A strange silence descended over the area, and the basal noise level was one of human voices, muttering in strange nuancial tones. The fifty groaning, heaving, dripping air conditioners in our motel had been silent for five hours; the wet, tumbling, thumping action of the washing machines in the huge laundry room was gone, the dryers no longer sang their hot centrifugal

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whines; the television babble, so routine in the auditory matrix, was conspicuous in its absence; and people seemed to be hovering about, uneasy, out of synch, no place to go, waiting for something to happen. There was little auto traffic along the beachside street, and then I saw four cars in the parking lot, engines running, passengers inside, windows up, and air conditioning on! The prediction here was easy: you got ten, maybe fifteen minutes of coolness, then the engine temperature nudged up over 250, the pressure began to build in the system, and somebody would say, hey, what the hell is wrong with this 1979 Mercury Marquisal 9-passenger wagon? One bold stud went ahead and loosened a radiator cap, and got a 5-foot pressurized geyser for his curiosity. Our wonderful vacationland environment, so smoothly powered by natural gas and electricity, now became a steaming sandbox of still, humid, 95-degree air, filled with sweating people.

It was inevitable that we were drawn like lemmings into the placid sea and drawn relatively far out into the shallows, now so conspicuously waveless, so that the sea looked rather like a wide river. Our voices carried well in the still air, and, with no discernible surf noise, we began to call to each other, as if to reassure ourselves of our control of the environment. A dark cloud materialized on the horizon and spawned a fairly good waterspout, but even this fascinating water tornado lost its form readily, as if the air was still everywhere. We waded, like painted people on a painted sea, and began to baptize each other — how odd it seemed! We laughed and teased, prolonged the cursory embrace and the supine immersion, and we looked expectantly at the horizons and up into the cloudless sky and back at the baking bright vista of bunkers and towers and blocks and decks, of ribbed balconies in 20-story stackpiles, and the white wooden latticework of the roller coaster clear against the sky, and — some kind of movement there! High on the curvilinear asymptote of the structure, I saw a roller coaster car hang briefly; then it disappeared down the steep drop, like an oscillographic blip riding the tail of a Gaussian curve. We absolutely baked in our oily jackets of sunburn lotion. We marinated in brine, we spat salty dribbles, dabbed at our reddening eyes, gazed at our wetly wrinkling fingerpads, and felt the clinging embrace of our very coiffures, now immersed and undulating, now dripping, now salt-dried in the baking oven of the 4 p.m. sun. The ocean was full of people and the beaches were all but empty. My throat was dry, Mother began to fret right there in the waist-deep water, Donna and Jaybird maintained their secret underwater embrace nearby, and Genghis lay just out of the water, beached, the water lapping at his armpits. Marcus swam tirelessly with a freshly discovered girlfriend, and Daddy looked powerless, standing

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in the flat surf, hands on hips, legs broad-stanced, an impotent Colossus of Rhodes. The very molecules of the dead air shifted in expectation, and then the saving clarion call boomed out from the beach. It was 200 decibels of rock music, blaring from a huge speaker atop a 10-story condominium. Simultaneously, the huge orchestrion on the main pavilion wheezed into life; the giant compressor in the bowels of the Hyatt Shaft arced a bright blue commutator flare and began to pump refrigerated air up the waiting ducts and into the $100-a-day suites; thousands of individual TV sets boomed on, energizing the strip of beach from its opulent northern tip to the gull and landfill site of the southern end. The ancient neon tubes sputtered back into life, and the holy trinity of incandescence, fluorescence, and efflorescence returned in victory to the area. Freon nudged its refrigerated molecules into freezer coils, receptacles ennervated, hot water tanks glowed and thermocoupled, the ice-makers clinked out a fresh formation of clear cold pucks, rattling down onto the strangely bare metal surface. Hair dryers in the hands of nubile nymphs and walrus-necked dowagers whirred and blew and sighed, and little toothbrushes spun their bristle wheels and plastic tufts against grateful molars. Blenders centrifuged *gaspacho*, can openers purred incessant strains, fluorescent tubes erupted slowly in bright milky shafts, razors buzzed, vibrators vibed — in all, the strange tepid world suddenly became alive, *and the people cheered and charged en masse for the shore!*

How can the mind picture five, seven, maybe ten thousand people, all bathers, and all charging in along a five-mile-wide front, all charging in from the flat, shallow sea toward an electrically bristling beach, the placid waters now frothed and whipped into spray and foam; hoarse shouts renting the air, squeals, screams, trumpetings, bellows of excitement, knees pumping high, jugulars corded on taut necks — the joy of the bathers was unrestrained, and the ocean fairly boiled in the exodus. Perhaps the scene could be compared to the storming of some Pacific island beach in the days of WW II, but even this comparison does not point up the massive, churning, watery action of this crazy activation of the shallow sea. I stood knee-deep in the emptying ocean and watched the charge of this aquatic brigade, dodging as a spindly-legged man danced by me, his movements like those of a straining ice-skater. The roaring of the crowd was absolutely unabated, and it was exciting to be part of a five-mile-long throng of loudly surging people. Our umbrella was bowled over in the stampede, and Marcus's football was booted far up against the dumpster. In the shallow cellar of our motel, 440v heavy-amp fuses and circuit breakers quivered and spat air-break flames under the load, but quickly stabilized as the fresh surge of power shunted

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into the distribution system *from an adjacent state!* I never even knew that states bought kilovolt-amperes from each other. It was just 4:30 or so, but already an electric sign atop a motel began to flash in luxuriant boldness: BEACHCOMBER BEACHCOMBER BEACHCOMBER

Hundreds of restaurant owners now breathed easier, their frozen wares saved from spoilage. Daddy seemed to sag in relief, then puff up, but I think the puffing up was because two shapely young girls were standing in front of him in the noisy poolside shower-line. The thin, leaning, green and black shower pylon was running full blast, its head spraying joyful arctic distillate down onto the oily-salty-sandy bodies beneath; and, mercifully cleansed, cooled, and purified, the people sought the dark incubative cold of their rooms. Many forsook the outdoor showers altogether for those in their rooms, and I quite understood that, but Mother particularly wanted to keep our room free of *sand*, for sand is silica and looks like sharp clear cubes under the microscope, and it is abrasive, and Mother had an interesting kind of inverted fetish about the sand: so many billions of individual particles about, but just a very few grains on the sheets could ruin everything. So we took our brief and delicious outdoor showers, and joined the strands of people ascending the velvety-red ozite stairs up to the balconies where the air conditioners now sang their proud, rushing, triumphant exhaust songs. Inside our room was absolute cool heaven, the air cleaned, dried, filtered, washed, electrostatically precipitated, dehumidified, desiccated, silica-gelled, and icy-chilled. I rubbed my arms and felt just self-indulgently splendid. I yawned and felt somesthetically optimal. I stretched, I fanned and curled my toes, I bent my wrists in hemiplegic angles, I did exaggerated athetoid and choreiform contortions, then lay in total flaccid luxury on the bed. I drank fresh orange juice and carefully bit the tiny pressurized teardrops of pulp that floated in the frost-jacketed glass. I drew the cool air in through my nose and then through my mouth, expanding my lung sacs with the languidly compressed molecules. The feeling was almost as dear as drinking water, and I began to appreciate how fish must feel when they draw the vital waters right through them and out again.

We must have used at least 200 gallons of hot water in our slow, luxuriative indoor showerings, and I pondered mightily over the amount of energy that must be diverted to this singular action. Surely we Americans keep billions of gallons of hot water stored in 40- or 50-gallon tanks all over the country, the water too hot for anything but automatic washers, so that for most tasks we must cut in cold water to render the stored hot water cool enough to utilize! And, of course, we make tea in strange ways: we heat the tea to make it hot and put ice in it

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to make it cold; we put sugar in it for sweetness, then lemon for sourness — the logic escapes me completely. Daddy showered and used hard Italian Cristal soap that reeked of glycerol, and Donna played long in bubble-bath froth. And now, once again, yet again, we were all velour-buffed and patted dry, our pores breathing the refrigerated air like thousands of medidermal snorkels, and we dressed and went out to dine. Tonight we ate Mexican food, and I repress the names of the things they brought us, for they reminded me briefly of baked sand, dry heat, and the chitinous desert skittering of scorpions in Mexico. And whenever I drink water in a Mexican restaurant, I think of Montezuma's revenge and my anal sphincter puckers a notch. After dinner, we once again tried to drive the length of the beach on the oceanside boulevard, but the traffic was monstrous, all locked in a chain of slowly turning engines, arcing points and plugs, detonating cylinders, reciprocating pistons, churning torque-shafts, spinning tubes, meshing gears, and effluent clouds of nitrous oxide and hydrocarbon chiaroscuro. Every cubic yard of space seemed to flare with luminous energy. Everything seemed plugged in to an electrical source, and everything was buzzing or flaring or turning or flashing. As brassy and dominant as the world looked through the windshield of our dark, cool, leather-smelling car, I suddenly began to think that, after all, the five-mile stretch of beach itself was quite small in the total scheme of things; small in a geographic sense, small in relation to the size of the continent, a tiny area beneath the visual scanners of the orbiting satellites, and a puny microcosm in space. And, I thought, the beach is plugged in, too, just as surely as the lamp and the hair dryer, the air compressor and the stove; all plugged in to spindly-walking transmission towers, multiple-stranded with spidery-thin 220kv wire filaments, the procession of towers marching across the horizons to brick powerhouses where steam boilers eat raw coal and natural gas or drink water from canals; where dynamos and turbines purr their massive rotational sounds, where oil cascades on spinning shafts as big as barrels, and mystical magnetic forcefields interflux and course out the flow of invisible electric power. I leaned forward in my bucket seat, secure and cool in the Citroen world, the flashing neon world outside strangely quiet, and I realized that we humans are probably the least adaptable of all the animals; that we are naked and hairless, that the water shocks us and the sun roasts us, that we cannot pant or slaver very well, nor burrow in mud or hibernate in caves, and that we require many years of care by our parents before being even halfway ready to fend for ourselves. Daddy seemed irritated by the staunched traffic flow and kept eyeing the temperature gauge. Mother sensed Daddy's mood, and made pleasant

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small talk. Marcus wanted to drive the car, or drink beer, or smoke, or sniff girls; and Donna wanted Jaybird to hold her around the waist beneath the water. Genghis wanted some M&M's and some dim relief from the EEG spikes that continuously shorted and grounded out his electrochemical matrices. The nightly fireworks display appeared in the sky outside, soft, popsicle-orange bursts of arcing streamers, but I fell asleep there in the car and dimly remember being carried up the wonderful shallow red-carpet stairs to my soft cool bed.

Three activity-packed days later, we opted for the return trip, and Daddy picked a plan called #4 NOSTALGIA TIER. After checking out of the motel, we actually *walked* a full mile in and away from the beach, past the new and plush towers, then the amazing change to the old adobe and pink stucco motels, wooden houses with large screened porches, and fields of sand oats and streamer grass and Spanish dagger, the fields alive with the sawing of insects. Just past an oily-looking industrial canal, we boarded a horse-drawn wagon and jounced along for two miles on a specially designed trail, all white with crushed shells. Genghis kept grabbing at the Spanish moss overhead, and I was certain I saw a robber crab caliper his awful armored claws around a palm branch and slide heavily out of sight. Daddy had sent the fully packed Citroen home by the underground pneumatic tube, and, next, we all bundled into a 1930 Model A Ford, with hard-finish and abominably scratchy mohair upholstery. We rode along a narrow concrete road for four miles, across wooden bridges and gently arching causeways, past Burma-Shave signs and general stores, and into the geographic province marked 1950. Here we got into a strange automobile that looked like an inverted bath tub, and we found, to our delight, that the soft foam-rubber seats folded flat backwards to make *beds!* I peeked at the name on the quarter panel and it said Nash Airflyte. Daddy lay for just a half minute on the bed, then adjusted the seat to vertical, started the engine by depressing the clutch, read data on the uniscope atop the steering column, and drove off. The quality of the ride was a bit mushy, but fun, and we drove at 50 mph on smooth asphalt roads, heading straight up the face of the continent, due north, this time for eight miles. Gas was 27¢ per gallon and we stopped at a roadhouse for 10¢ cheese sandwiches and 5¢ Dr Peppers. At the 1960 portal, we got into a high, squarish-looking Benz diesel that made me uneasy at first, but turned out to be a wonderfully stable machine that seemed to have *not even one tiny little rattle.* The road widened and there were stretches of dual expanse and grassed median. The road began to climb just a bit now, and the small diesel engine ran hard and well, and Daddy let Marcus drive. Marcus said it was fun to drive flat-out, and, sure enough,

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he kept his foot in it all the way, really standing on it, and the Benz dieseled along just as smooth and Aryan as you please. After 30 miles, we reached the 1970 sector, turned in the fun-yellow Benz, and sat a while in the freeway rest area. Donna was sad about leaving Jaybird, and so she popped a mood-elevator lozenge. Genghis chortled and watched a pompously prancing schnauzer (that may have been smarter than Genghis), Marcus scanned the scene for girls, and Mother sat prim and tolerant on the heavy cement picnic bench. At the 1970 ingress port, the vehicle they issued us was a huge, wallowing, heavy thing called Electra 225 (Marcus called it "deuce-and-a-quarter"), all leather and fabric and chrome inside, with stereo speakers and CB rig, police scanners, and a radar antenna. We swept along elevated freeways at 70 mph, and the scenery began to look more familiar, so much so that I opted for a visual mask and private retinograph tapes. I love to watch The Little Rascals and Amos and Andy.

After two and a half hours, and six different transportation modalities, we were still little more than 60 terrestrial miles from the seashore, but our trip was now to become incrementally accelerated as we entered the more technologically advanced time zones. In the 1975 sector, we egg-beat our whirring, square-end, rotored way 500 feet above the ground in a dandy helicopter, each of us peering eagerly out and down and around, as the craft slanted and dipped along at about 200 mph. At the 1980 way station, we mag-rocketed all the way home and settled, pretty as pie, on antigravs, right in our very own back yard, where the Citroen sat facing us on the drive. We toggled our pod nacelles, the graviton fields eased us on to the ground, and we were back home, all safe and sound. Although the saying is old and cliché-like, I should like to say, and, of course, to write here, that I very much enjoyed my trip to the beach, wish you could have been there, and am glad to be back home again.

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Olaf Stapledon, the English philosopher and novelist, wrote of himself: "I was born in the Wirral, across the water from Liverpool; the Wirral has nearly always been my headquarters. I was educated at Abbotsholme School and Balliol College, Oxford. Then, for a year, with much nerve strain and little success, I taught at the Manchester Grammar School. During the first great war I was with the Friend's Ambulance Unit, in a motor convoy attached to a division of the French army. After the war I married Agnes Miller, thus sealing an intermittent romance of 12 years standing. I began to study philosophy and psychology at Liverpool and took a Ph.D. I wrote a technical philosophical book and purposed an academic career. But I then also wrote LAST AND FIRST MEN, which was a success, and rashly gave up my university post, determined to pull my weight by writing."

Mrs. Stapledon says of this story that "it was written between 1940 and 1950 using as background such little old country cottages where my husband and I used to call in for teas on Saturday afternoon walks over Thurstaston Common." For more information on the author and story, see Sam Moskowitz's afterword.

A Modern Magician

BY

OLAF STAPLEDON

They confronted each other across a tea table in a cottage garden. Helen was leaning back, coldly studying Jim's face. It was an oddly childish, almost foetal face, with its big brow, snub nose, and pouting lips. Childish, yes; but in the round dark eyes there was a gleam of madness. She had to admit that she was in a way drawn to this odd young man, partly perhaps by his very childishness and his awkward innocent attempts at love-making; but partly by that sinister gleam.

Jim was leaning forward, talking hard. He had been talking for a long time, but she was no longer listening. She was deciding that though she was drawn to him she also disliked him. Why had she come out with him again? He was weedy, and self-centered. Yet she had come.

Something he was saying recaptured her attention. He seemed to be annoyed that she had not been listening. He was all worked up about something. She heard him say, 'I know you despise me, but you're making a big mistake. I tell you I have *powers*. I

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didn't intend to let you into my secret, yet; but, damn it, I will. I'm finding out a lot about the power of mind over matter. I can control matter at a distance, just by willing it. I'm going to be a sort of modern magician. I've even killed things by just willing it.'

Helen, who was a medical student, prided herself on her shrewd materialism. She laughed contemptuously.

His face flushed with anger, and he said, 'Oh very well! I'll have to show you.'

On a bush a robin was singing. The young man's gaze left the girl's face, and settled intently on the robin. 'Watch that bird', he said. His voice was almost a whisper. Presently the bird stopped singing, and after looking miserable for a while, with its head hunched into its body, it dropped from the tree without opening its wings. It lay on the grass with its legs in the air, dead.

Jim let out a constricted squawk of triumph, staring at his victim. Then he turned his eyes on Helen. Mopping his pasty face with his handkerchief, he said, 'That was a good turn. I've never tried it on a bird before, only on flies and beetles.'

The girl stared at him silently, anxious not to seem startled. He set about telling her his secret. She was not bored any more.

He told her that a couple of years earlier he had begun to be interested in 'all this paranormal stuff'. He had been to seances, and read about psychical research. He wouldn't have bothered if he hadn't suspected he had strange powers himself. He was never really interested in spooks and thought transference, and so on. What fascinated him was the possibility that a mind might be able to affect matter directly. 'Psychokinesis', they called this power; and they knew very little about it. But he didn't care a damn about the theoretical puzzles. All he wanted was power. He told Helen about the queer experiments that had been done in America with dice. You threw the dice time after time, and you willed them to settle with the two sixes uppermost. Generally they didn't; but when you had done a great many experiments you totted up the results, and found that there had been more sixes than would have turned up by sheer chance. It certainly looked as though the mind really had some slight influence. This opened up terrific possibilities.

He began to do little experiments on his own, guided by the findings of the researchers, but also by some of his own ideas. The power was fantastically slight, so you had to test it out in situations where the tiniest influence would have detectable results, just tipping the scales.

He didn't have much success with the dice, because (as he explained) he never knew precisely what he had to do. The dice tumbled out too quickly for him. And so he only had the slight effect that the Americans had reported.

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So he had to think up new tricks, that would give him a better opening. He had had a scientific training, so he decided to try to influence chemical reactions and simple physical processes. He did many experiments, and learned a lot. He prevented a minute spot of water from rusting a knife. He stopped a crystal of salt from dissolving in water. He formed a minute crystal of ice in a drop of water, and finally froze the whole drop by simply 'willing away' all the heat, in fact by stopping all the molecular movement.

He told Helen of his first success at killing, a literally microscopic success. He brewed some very stagnant water, and put a drop on a slide. Then through the microscope he watched the swarm of micro-organisms milling about. Mostly they were like stumpy sausages, swimming with wavy tales. They were of many sizes. He thought of them as elephants, cows, sheep, rabbits. His idea was that he might be able to stop the chemical action in one of these little creatures, and so kill it. He had read up a lot about their inner workings, and he knew what key process he could best tackle. Well, the damned things kept shifting about so fast he couldn't concentrate on any one of them for long enough. He kept losing his victim in the crowd. However, at last one of the 'rabbits' swam into a less populous part of the slide, and he fixed his attention on it long enough to do the trick. He willed the crucial chemical process to stop, and it did stop. The creature stopped moving, and stayed still indefinitely. It was almost certainly dead. His success, he said, made him 'feel like God.'

Later he learned to kill flies and beetles by freezing their brains. Then he tried a frog, but had no success. He didn't know enough physiology to find a minute key-process to check. However, he read up a lot of stuff, and at last he succeeded. He simply stopped the nerve current in certain fibres in the spinal cord, that controlled the heartbeat. It was this method also that he had used on the robin.

'That's just the beginning,' he said. 'Soon I shall have the world at my feet. And if you join up with me, it will be at your feet too.'

Throughout this monologue the girl had listened intently, torn between revulsion and fascination. There was a kind of bad smell about it all, but one couldn't afford to be too squeamish in these days. Besides, there was probably nothing in morality, anyhow. All the same, Jim was playing with fire. Strange, though, how he seemed to have grown up while he was talking. Somehow he didn't look gawky and babyish any more. His excitement, and her knowledge that his power was real, had made him look thrillingly sinister. But she decided to be cautious and aloof.

When at last Jim was silent, she staged a concealed yawn, and said, 'You're clever, aren't you! That was a good trick you did, though a horrid

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one. If you go much farther, you'll end on the gallows.

He snorted, and said, 'It's not like you to be a coward.'

The taunt stung her. Indignantly she answered, 'Don't be ridiculous! Why should I join with you, as you call it, merely because you can kill a bird by some low trick or other?'

In Jim's life there had been certain events which he had not mentioned. They seemed to him irrelevant to the matter in hand, but they were not really so at all. He had always been a weakling. His father, a professional footballer, despised him, and blamed the frail mother. The couple had lived a cat-and-dog life almost since their honeymoon. At school Jim had been thoroughly bullied; and in consequence he had conceived a deep hatred of the strong, and at the same time an obsessive yearning to be strong himself. He was a bright lad, and had secured a scholarship at a provincial University. As an undergraduate, he kept himself to himself, worked hard for a scientific degree, and aimed at a career of research in atomic physics. Already his dominant passion was physical power, so he chose its most spectacular field. But somehow his plans went awry. In spite of his reasonably good academic qualifications, he found himself stuck in a low-grade job in an industrial lab, a job which he had taken on as a stopgap till he could capture a post in one of the great institutions devoted to atomic physics. In this backwater, his naturally sour disposition became embittered. He felt he was not getting a fair chance. Inferior men were outstripping him. Fate was against him. In fact he developed something like a persecution mania. But the truth was that he was a bad co-operator. He never developed the team spirit, which is so necessary in the immensely complex work of fundamental physical research. Also, he had no genuine interest in physical theory, and was impatient of the necessity of advanced theoretical study. What he wanted was power, power for himself as an individual. He recognized that modern research was a co-operative affair, and that in it, though one might gain dazzling prestige, one would not gain any physical power as an individual. Psychokinesis, on the other hand, might perhaps give him his heart's desire. His interest rapidly shifted to the more promising field. Henceforth his work in the lab was a mere means of earning a livelihood.

After the conversation in the cottage garden he concentrated more eagerly than ever on his venture. He must gain even more spectacular powers to impress Helen. He had decided that for him, at any rate, the promising line was to develop his skill at interfering with and checking small physical and chemical processes, in lifeless matter and in living things. He learned how to prevent a struck match from

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lighting. He tried to by-pass the whole of atomic research by applying his power of psychokinesis to the release of energy pent up in the atom. But in this exciting venture he had no success at all, perhaps because in spite of his training, he had not sufficient theoretical knowledge of physics, nor access to the right kind of apparatus for setting the experiment. On the biological side he succeeded in killing a small dog by the same process as he had applied to the robin. He was confident that with practice he would soon be able to kill a man.

He had one alarming experience. He decided to try to stop the sparking of his motor-cycle engine. He started up the bike on its stand, and set about 'willing' the spark to fail. He concentrated his attention on the points of the sparking plug and the leaping spark, and 'willed' the space between the points to become impenetrable, an insulator. This experiment, of course, involved a far greater interference with physical processes than freezing a nerve fibre or even preventing a match from lighting. Sweat poured from him as he struggled with his task. At last the engine began to miss fire. But something queer happened to himself. He had a moment of horrible vertigo and nausea, and then he lost consciousness. When he recovered, the engine was once more running normally.

This mishap was a challenge. He had never been seriously interested in the mere theoretical side of his experiments for its own sake, but now he had perforce to ask himself what exactly was happening when by an 'act of will' he interfered with a physical process. The obvious explanation was that in some way the physical energy that should have crossed the gap between the points had been directed into his own body; in fact that he had suffered the electric shock that he would have had if he had touched the points. It may be doubted whether the true explanation was as simple as this, for his symptoms were not those of electric shock. It might be nearer the truth to say that the inhibition of so much physical energy caused some sort of profound physical disturbance in him; or else, to put the matter very crudely, that the physical energy was in some sense converted into physical energy in him. This theory is born out by the fact that, when he recovered consciousness, he was in a state of great excitement and mental vigour; as though he had taken some stimulating drug like benzedrine.

Whatever the truth of the matter, he adopted the simpler theory, and set about side-tracking the intruding energy, so as to protect himself. After much anxious experimentation; he found that he could do so by concentrating his attention both on the sparking plug and on some other living organism, which then 'drew off the electricity', and suffered accordingly. A sparrow sufficed. It died of the shock,

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while he himself remained conscious long enough to stop the engine. On another occasion he used his neighbour's dog as a 'lightning conductor'. The animal collapsed, but soon recovered consciousness, and careered about the garden barking hilariously.

His next experiment was more exciting, and much much more reprehensible. He went into the country and took up his position on a knoll, whence he could see a fairly long stretch of road. Presently a car came into sight. He concentrated his attention on the sparking plugs, and 'willed' the electrical energy to escape into the driver. The car slowed down, vacillated between the two sides of the road, and came to a standstill across the fairway. He could see the driver slumped over the steering wheel. There was no one else in the car. Greatly excited, Jim wanted to see what would happen. Presently another car came in the opposite direction, hooted violently, and drew up with screaching brakes. The driver emerged, went to the derelict car, opened a door, and was confronted by the unconscious occupant. While the horrified newcomer was wondering what to do, the other recovered consciousness. There was an anxious conversation, and finally both cars went their several ways.

Jim now felt ready to impress his girl friend. Since the killing of the robin, they had occasionally met, and in his awkward and adolescent way he had tried to make love to her. She had always discouraged him; but she was obviously more interested in him since the robin incident. Though she sometimes affected to despise him, he felt that she was secretly drawn to him.

But one day he had an unpleasant surprise. He had boarded a bus to take him home from his work. He climbed the stairs and settled into a seat. Suddenly he noticed Helen sitting a few seats ahead with a curly-headed young man in a sports coat. The couple were deep in conversation, with their heads bent together. The girl's hair brushed his cheek. Presently she laughed, with a ring of happiness such as he had never before heard from her. She turned her face toward her companion. It was aglow with vitality, and love. Or so it seemed to the jealous lover three seats behind.

Irrational fury swept over him. He was so ignorant of the ways of girls, and so indignant that *'his* girl' (for so he regarded her) should take notice of another man, that jealously wholly possessed him, to the exclusion of all other considerations. He could think of nothing but destroying his rival. His gaze seized upon the nape of the hated neck before him. He passionately conjured up images of the hidden vertebrae and the enclosed bundle of nerve fibres. The nerve-current must cease; must, must cease. Presently the curly head sank on Helen's shoulder, and then the whole body fell forward.

The murderer hurriedly rose from

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his seat and turned his back on the incipient commotion. He left the bus, as though ignorant of the disaster.

Continuing his journey on foot, he was still so excited that he had no thought but exultation over his triumph. But gradually his frenzy subsided, and he faced the fact that he was a murderer. Urgently he reminded himself that after all there was no point in feeling guilty, since morality was a mere superstition. But alas, he did feel guilty, horribly guilty; the more so since he had no fear of being caught.

As the days passed, Jim alternated between what he regarded as 'irrational' guilt and intoxicating triumph. The world was indeed at his feet. But he must play his cards carefully. Unfortunately his guilt gave him no peace. He could not sleep properly; and when he did sleep, he had terrifying dreams. By day his experiments were hampered by the fantasy that he had sold his soul to the Devil. This notion infuriated him with its very silliness. Yet he could not rid himself of it. He began drinking rather heavily. But he soon found that alcohol reduced his psychokinetic power, so he firmly broke himself of the habit.

Another possible form of relief from his obsessive guilt was sex. But somehow he could not bring himself to face Helen. He was irrationally afraid of her. Yet she must be quite ignorant that he had killed her lover.

At last he met her accidentally in the street. There was no possibility of avoiding her. She was rather wan, he thought, but she smiled at him, and actually suggested a talk over a cup of coffee. He was torn between fear and desire, but presently they were seated in a café. After some trivial remarks, she said, 'Please comfort me! I have had a terrible shock quite recently. I was on the top of a bus with my brother who has been in Africa for three years. While we were talking, he collapsed and died almost instantly. He seemed perfectly fit. They say it was some view virus in the spinal cord.' She noticed that Jim's face had turned deadly pale. 'What's the matter?' she cried, 'Are *you* going to die on me too?" He pulled himself together, and assured her that sheer sympathy for her had made him feel faint. He loved her so much. How could he help being upset by her misfortune? To his relief Helen was completely taken in by this explanation. She gave him, for the first time, the glowing smile he had seen her turn upon her brother.

Encouraged, he pressed home his advantage. He said he did so want to comfort her. They must meet again soon. And if she was at all interested in his experiments, he would show her something really exciting some time. They arranged a trip in the country for the following Sunday. He privately decided to repeat for her benefit his trick with a passing car.

Sunday was a bright summer day. Sitting together in an empty railway

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carriage, they talked a good deal about her brother. He was rather bored, but he expressed ardent sympathy. She said she never imagined he had such a warm heart. He took her arm. Their faces drew close together, and they looked into each other's eyes. She felt an overwhelming tenderness for his strange, rather grotesque though boyish face, wherein, she told herself, the innocence of childhood was overlaid by an adult consciousness of power. She felt the underlying grimness, and she welcomed it. Jim for his part was realizing that she was very desirable. The warm glow of health had returned to her face. (Or was it a glow of love?) The full, sweet lips, the kindly-observant grey eyes, filled him not only with physical desire but a swooning gentleness that was new to him. The recollection of his guilt and present deception tormented him. An expression of misery came over his face. He let go her arm and bowed forward with his head in his hands. Perplexed and compassionate, she put an arm round his shoulders, and kissed his hair. Suddenly he burst into tears, and buried his head on her breast. She hugged him and crooned over him as though he were her child. She begged him to tell her what was the matter, but he could only blubber, 'Oh I'm horrible! I'm not good enough for you'.

Later in the day, however, he had quite recovered his spirits, and they walked arm in arm through the woods. He told her of his recent successes, culminating with the car incident. She was impressed and amused, but also morally shocked by the irresponsibility of risking a fatal accident merely to test his powers. At the same time she was obviously fascinated by the fanaticism that drove him to such lengths. He was flattered by her interest, and intoxicated by her tenderness and her physical proximity. For they were now resting on the little knoll where he intended to do his trick with the car, and he was lying with his head in her lap, gazing up at her face, where all the love that his life had missed seemed to be gathered. He realized that he was playing the part of an infant rather than a lover. But she seemed to need him to do so, and he was happy in his role. But soon sexual desire began to reassert itself, and with its masculine self-respect. He conceived an uncontrolable lust to demonstrate his godlike nature by some formidable display of his powers. He became the primitive savage who must kill an enemy in the presence of the beloved.

Looking up through Helen's fluttering hair, he saw a small object moving. For a moment he took it for a gnat, then realized that it was a distant aeroplane approaching.

'Watch that plane,' he said; and she was startled by the abruptness of his voice. She looked up, and down again at him. His face was contorted with effort. His eyes glared, his nostrils dilated. She had an impulse to fling him from her, so brutal he looked. But

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fascination triumphed. 'Keep your eyes on the plane', he commanded. She looked up, then down, then up again. She knew she ought to break the devilish spell. (There was something called morality, but a delusion, probably.) Fascination had triumphed.

Presently the advancing plane's four engines ceased one by one to fire. The plane glided for a while, but soon gave evidence of being out of control. It vacillated, staggered, and then was in a nose dive, spiralling. Helen screamed, but did nothing. The plane disappeared behind a distant wood. After a few seconds a black plume of smoke began to rise from behind the wood.

Jim raised himself from Helen's lap, and turning, pressed her backwards to the ground. 'That's how I love you', he whispered fiercely. Then he furiously kissed her lips, her neck.

She made a violent effort to pull herself together and resist the impulses of self-abandonment to this lunatic. She struggled to free herself from his grip; and presently the two stood facing each other, panting. 'You're mad,' she cried. 'Think what you have done! You have killed people just to show how clever you are. And then you make love to me.' She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

He was still in a state of crazy exaltation, and he laughed. Then he taunted her. 'Call yourself a realist! You're squeamish. Well, now you know what I am really like; and what I can do. And see! You're mine. I can kill you at any moment, wherever you are. I shall do whatever I like with you. And if you try to stop me, you'll go the way of the robin, and — the man on the bus.' Her hands dropped from her tear-stained face. She stared at him in mingled horror and — tenderness. She said quietly, 'You're quite mad, you poor boy. And you seemed so gentle. Oh my dear what can I do about you?'

There was a long silence. Then suddenly Jim collapsed on the ground, blubbering like a child. She stood over him in perplexity.

While she was wondering what to do, and blaming herself for not breaking the spell before it was too late, he was in an agony of self-loathing. Then he started to use his techniques upon himself, so that no more harm should be done. It was more difficult than he expected; for as soon as he began to lose consciousness he also lost his grip on the operation. But he made a desperate effort of will. When Helen, noticing his stillness, knelt down by him, he was dead.

AFTERWORD
by Sam Moskowitz

When great writers die, a search begins among their papers for works that were never published during their lifetime, even for unfinished manuscripts, fragments, plot outlines and letters. That was the case with Edgar Allan Poe, and that

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most certainly and more recently has been the case with H. P. Lovecraft. Every previously unread narrative assumes additional importance because it rounds out the literary picture and human figure of the man. Greatness has already been proven, the additional material helps give depth and clarity to the foundation of that greatness.

Most science fiction historians are in complete agreement that Olaf Stapledon was one of the greatest minds and imaginations ever to work in this field. His first epic *Last and First Men* (1930), related the history of mankind from the 1930's through the next two billion years, as humans evolve and mutate physically, grow mentally, progress scientifically, change socially and advance in philosophy and in the fine arts. *The Star Maker* (1937) treats those two billion years as an inconsequential episode and goes on to relate the entire future history of the *universe!*

From those two books modern science fiction writers developed the nomenclature of the future, including galactic empires, symbiotic life, a cosmological community; pivoting stories on the psychology and philosophy of aliens as well as on action, and thereby influencing writers as renowned and diverse as Robert A. Heinlein, Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov, A. E. van Vogt, Clifford D. Simak, Eric Frank Russell and C. S. Lewis, to name but a few.

The recent discovery of a few unpublished works of fantasy among the papers of such a man is a matter of extraordinary interest. In recent years an Olaf Stapledon Society was formed in England with the wife of the late William Olaf Stapledon, Agnes Stapledon, as patron. She has kept his work room just as it was when he died, with all his books, notes and papers intact. Visits there by members of the Society have located unpublished philosophical works and fiction, and two of them have been published in England by Brans Head Books Ltd. They are *4 Encounters*, a collection of fictionalized philosophical esays and *The Nebula Maker*, a shorter, preliminary attempt at the book that finally became *The Star Maker*. Projected, but not yet announced, are a volume of essays about Olaf Stapledon, which, if published, will include a lengthy new biography I have written of the man based on a visit to his home and interviews with his wife and "foster" son, as well as a volume of four philosophical fantasies, only one of them previously published.

A Modern Magician is one of the stories for that last projected book, and this marks its first printing anywhere. It is not a philosophical tract but a real story of a man who develops supernormal powers without the maturity to properly direct them. The internal evidence in the story, particularly the references to "atomic physicists," make it a work of Stapledon's *later* years, obviously after 1945 and possibly close to the end of his life (1950). The fact that three of them had appar-

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ently not been submitted for publication previously creates the possibility that Stapledon had started to work up a volume of short stories, all fantastic, and had either abandoned it or not lived to complete it.

The appearance of this short story in these pages represents a publishing coup, no less in importance than if a hitherto unknown work by Edgar Allan Poe, H. G. Wells or Nathaniel Hawthorne was being presented here. Stapledon was that much of a titan in our field.

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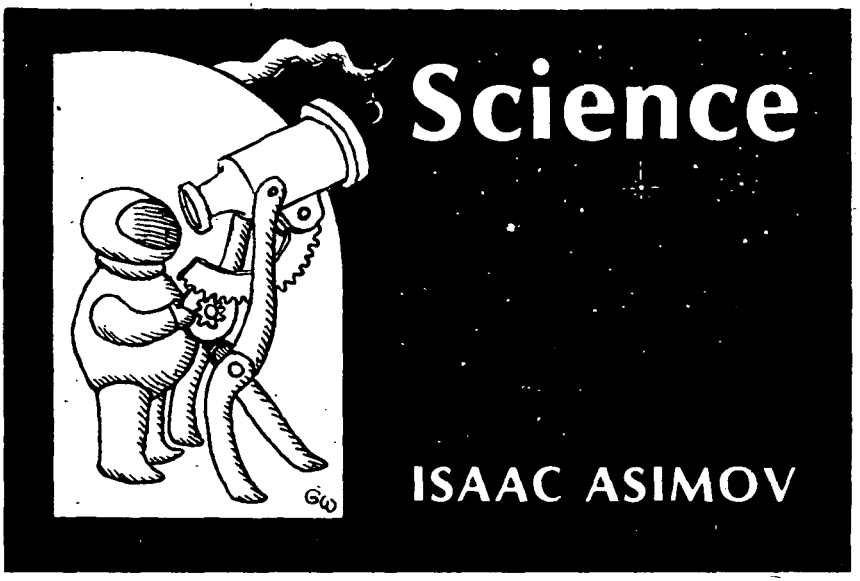

BELOW THE HORIZON

The role of a writer is hard, for on every hand he meets up with critics. Some critics are, I suppose, wiser than others, but there are very few who are so wise as to resist the urge to show off.

Critics of science popularizations always have the impulse to list every error they can find and trot them out and smile bashfully at this display of their own erudition. Sometimes the errors are egregious and are worth pointing out; sometimes the critic is indulging in nitpicking; and sometimes the critic inadvertently shows himself up.

I've got a review of one of my science collections in my hand right now. Never mind where it appeared and who wrote it—except that the critic is a reputable professional astronomer. The point is that three-fourths of the review is a listing of my errors.

Some of the errors referred to by the critic are well-taken, and I'll have to be more careful in the future. Other errors he listed I found simply irritating.

After all, in writing on science for the public, you must occasionally cut a corner if you are not to get bogged down in too much off-target detail. Naturally, you don't want to cut a corner in such a way as to give a false im-

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pression. If you must simplify, you don't want ever to over-simplify.

But what is the boundary line between "simplify" and "over-simplify"? There is no scientific formula that will give you the answer. Each popularizer must come to his own conclusion with respect to that, and to do so he must consult his own intuition and good sense. While laying no claim to perfection, you understand, I hope you won't mind my saying that in this respect my intuition is pretty good.

But to the point—

The reviewer says: "Elsewhere he [Isaac Asimov] states, incorrectly, that 'as seen from the United States ... Alpha Centauri ... is always below the horizon.' It can, in fact, be seen from the lower part of Florida every night during the summer months."

(Of course, he can be nit-picked as well. By 'lower part of Florida' he means the southern part. Apparently he assumes that the north-is-up convention in modern maps is a cosmic law. And he doesn't really mean that it is seen 'every night' — he means every night that the clouds don't interfere. — See how easy nit-picking is, Professor Reviewer?)

However, even an irritating review can be useful since I can now go into the matter of just which stars can be seen from which points on Earth.

To begin with, I will make some simplifications which I will specify in full, lest I be nitpicked for either having not made them, or having made them without stating the fact.

1) We will suppose that the Earth is a perfectly smooth body with no surface irregularities whatever. I rather think that it doesn't matter for the purposes of this essay that it is an oblate spheroid, but as long as we're simplifying, let's go all the way. Let's suppose it is a perfect mathematical sphere, so that from any point on Earth we will see a true, perfectly circular horizon.

2) We will suppose that the atmosphere does not absorb light. We will suppose there are no clouds, no fogs, no mists, no smoke. Every star that is bright enough to see with the naked eye is seen.

3) We will suppose that only the stars exist in the sky. There is no Sun to blank out the stars in the daytime. No Moon, planets, comets, or any other Solar system objects to confuse the issue. Just the stars!

4) We will suppose atmospheric refraction does not exist. In actual fact, refraction tends to make a star appear higher above the horizon than it really is (unless it is directly at zenith), and since this effect is the more pronounced the closer the star is to the horizon, a star which is distinctly below the horizon can actually be seen slightly above. We will ignore this and suppose that light

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travels from a star to our eye in a perfectly straight line without being affected by either refraction or, for that matter, any gravitational field.

5) Let us suppose that the Earth's orientation with respect to the stars is absolutely unchanging. This is not so, of course, for the orientation changes in several ways:

a - The Earth's axis shifts with time, so that if we imagine it to be extended to a point in the sky at both ends, each point marks out a slow circle with time. The Earth takes nearly 26,000 years to shift so as to describe that circle, which is called "the precession of the equinoxes."

b - The Earth's axis inclines more to the ecliptic and then less to the ecliptic by a matter of 2.5 degrees in a cycle that is 41,000 years long.

c - The position of the North Pole on the Earth's surface varies from moment to moment so that it describes an irregular circle that deviates from the average by distances of up to a couple of hundred meters.

d - The land we stand on is slowly moving as the tectonic plates shift.

6) We will assume that the stars are not themselves changing position relative to each other. Of course, all the stars *are* moving, but except for some of the very nearest, these motions are so damped out by huge distances that even our best instruments can scarcely detect any change at all over a lifetime. For the very near stars where "proper motion" can be measured by astronomers, the motion is still not great enough to be noticeable to the naked eye over a human lifetime.

All these simplifications do not introduce any substantial errors in what is to be my exposition.

Next let us describe the sky with reference to the Earth.

To the eye, the sky appears to be a solid sphere that encloses the Earth. If we wanted to make a three-dimensional model of the Universe we could make a small sphere with the continents and oceans painted upon it. That would be the Terrestrial Sphere. Around it we could construct a larger concentric sphere (one with the same center as the smaller one) and call it the Celestial Sphere*.

On the Celestial Sphere we can mark off the stars as we see them in the sky. This ignores the fact that the sky is not really a spherical surface but that it is an endless volume and that the stars are not at the same distance from Earth but at wildly different distances. From the standpoint of this essay, however, the markings on the sphere are sufficient.

**"Celestial" is from the Latin word for "sky." "Ceiling" comes from the same Latin word.*

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How do we locate the stars on the Celestial Sphere?

To begin with, let's extend Earth's axis in imagination until it reaches the sky in both directions. The northern end of the axis reaches the sky at the North Celestial Pole and the southern end of the axis would reach it at the South Celestial Pole.

If we were standing precisely at the North Pole, the North Celestial Pole would be at the zenith, directly overhead. The South Celestial Pole would be at the nadir, on the spot on the Celestial Sphere that is on the other side of the Earth directly under our feet. If we were standing precisely at the South Pole, it would be the South Celestial Pole that would be at zenith and the North Celestial Pole that would be at nadir.

On Earth, we can draw a circle about the surface in such a way that every point on that circle is exactly halfway between Earth's North Pole and South Pole. The circle is the Equator, so-called because it divides the Earth's surface into two equal halves. You can draw a similar circle on the Celestial Sphere and you will have the Celestial Equator.

If you are standing anywhere on the Equator, then the Celestial Equator will be a line across the sky starting on the horizon due east, passing through the zenith, and ending on the horizon due west.

Just as you mark off the surface of the terrestrial sphere into parallels of latitude and meridians of longitude, so you can mark off the Celestial Sphere into parallels of Celestial Latitude and meridians of Celestial Longitude.

If Earth and sky were at rest with respect to each other, every star in the sky would be exactly at zenith with respect to some point on the surface of the Earth. The Celestial Latitude and Longitude of that star would be precisely the latitude and longitude of the point on Earth's surface over which it stood at zenith.

As a matter of fact, though, the Earth turns from west to east, completing one turn with respect to the stars in 23 hours and 56 minutes.* Naturally, to us standing on the Earth it seems as though we were motionless and that the sky was turning from east to west in 23 hours and 56 minutes per turn.

The apparent rotation of the Celestial Sphere is equal and opposite to that of the real rotation of the Earth and it takes place on the same axis. That means that the Celestial North Pole and the Celestial South pole remain fixed in the sky. All other points in the sky make circles parallel to the Celestial

**It takes another four minutes for the turning Earth to catch up with the position of the Sun in the sky, since in the interval the sun has moved slightly with respect to the stars. It is with respect to the Sun that we measure the length of the day. That makes the day 24 hours long.*

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Equator. That means their Celestial Latitude does not change with time.

The Celestial Longitude does change, and that means the complication of an accurate clock must be brought in. In this essay, however, we're concerned only with Celestial Latitude, which is a good break for us.

Celestial Latitude is usually referred to as "declinations" by astronomers and is marked off as plus and minus from the Celestial Equator, rather than as north and south. On the Terrestrial Sphere, for instance, we would speak of latitudes of 40° N and 40° S but on the Celestial Sphere, we speak of declinations of +40° and -40°.

Now, then, let's imagine we are standing precisely at the North Pole. The North Celestial Pole is at zenith and, as the Celestial Sphere turns, it stays there. The entire Celestial Sphere pivots around it, and every point on the sphere describes a circle parallel to the horizon. The Celestial Equator is exactly at the horizon at all points.

This means that every star in the sphere that is in the North Celestial Hemisphere, and therefore has a positive declination, remains above the horizon at all times and is therefore visible. (Remember we are ignoring Sun, clouds, haze, refraction and all other phenomena that would tend to spoil our pretty theoretical picture.)

If every star in the North Celestial Hemisphere is forever visible, as seen from the North Pole, the reverse is true for every star in the South Celestial Hemisphere (all of which have a negative declination). Such stars describe circles *below* the horizon and parallel to it so that they never rise above it.

From the North Pole, then, we see only one-half the stars in the sky (assuming they are evenly spread over the Celestial Sphere, which they are, if we consider only those visible to the naked eye). We always see the stars with positive declination, and we never see the stars with negative declination.

From the South Pole, the situation is reversed. We always see the stars with negative declination, and we never see the stars with positive declination.

Next, imagine yourself back at the North Pole and moving away from it along some particular meridian of longitude toward lower latitudes. Your motion is reflected in the sky, since as you move on the surface of the Earth, it seems to you that you remain on top of the sphere with your body vertical and that it is the Celestial Sphere — the entire Celestial Sphere — that tips.

Suppose you move 10 degrees south of the North Pole. Since the North Pole is at 90° N such a motion bring you to 80° N. At 80° N, the North Celestial Pole seems to have moved 10 degrees away from the zenith and it is now 80 degrees above the northern horizon. In the same way (though you

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can't see it) the South Celestial Pole has moved 10 degrees away from the nadir and is now 80 degrees below the southern horizon.

This tilt continues as you move toward lower and lower latitudes.

The general rule is that when you are at X° N, the North Celestial Pole is X degrees above the northern horizon, and the South Celestial Pole is X degrees below the southern horizon. (The two Celestial Poles must, of course, always be directly opposite each other on the Celestial Sphere.)

Again the situation is reversed in the southern hemisphere. As you move away from the South Pole, the South Celestial Pole tilts downard toward the southern horizon, and the North Celestial Pole tilts upward (unseen) toward the northern horizon.

The general rule is that when you are at X° S, the South Celestial Pole is X degrees above the southern horizon, and the North Celestial Pole is X degrees below the northern horizon.

At the Equator, which is at 0°, the North Celestial Pole is 0 degrees above the northern horizon, and the South Celestial Pole is 0 degrees above the southern horizon. In other words, both Celestial Poles are exactly at the horizon; at opposite points on the horizon, of course.

Come back, now, to 80° N, where the North Celestial Pole is 10 degrees away from the zenith in the direction of the northern horizon. The entire Celestial Sphere is tilted, and that includes the Celestial Equator, half of which is lifted above the sourthern horizon and the other half is dropped below the northern horizon. The maximum height of the Celestial Equator is 10 degrees above the horizon due south, while the maximum depth is 10 degrees below the horizon due north.

Since all the stars make circles parallel to the Celestial Equator, all are now making circles that are oblique to the horizon.

Since the Celestial Equator dips 10 degrees below the northern horizon at one end of its circle, any star located in the North Celestial Hemisphere within 10 degrees of the Celestial Equator; that is, any star with a declination between + 10° and 0, dips below the northern horizon as it moves around the sky.

On the other hand, since the Celestial Equator rises 10 degrees above the southern horizon at the other end of its circle, any star located in the South Celestial Hemisphere within 10 degrees of the Celestial Equator — that is any star with a declination between 0 and -10° — rises above the southern horizon as it moves around the sky.

Any star with a positive declination of more than +10° gets closer to the horizon at the northern end of its circle than at its southern, but never quite

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sinks below it. Any star with a negative declination of more than -10° rises closer to the horizon at the southern end of its circle than at its northern, but never quite rises above it.

From a stand at 80° N then, we can summarize by saying that all stars with a positive declination of more than +10° are always visible in the sky (we're disregarding the occasional presence of the Sun, remember) and all stars with a negative declination of more than -10° are never visible in the sky. Those stars with a declination between +10° and -10° are sometimes above the horizon and visible and sometimes below the horizon and invisible.

We can work this out for any latitude on Earth and come up with a general rule.

If you are standing at X° N on the Terrestrial Sphere, then all stars with a positive declination of more than +(90-X)° are always in the sky, while all stars with a negative declination of more than -(90-X)° are never in the sky. All stars with a declination between +(90-X)+ and -(90-X)° rise and set, and so are sometimes in the sky and sometimes not in the sky.

If you are standing at X° S on the Terrestrial Sphere, the situation is symmetrically opposed. All stars with a negative declination of more than -(90-X)° are always in the sky. All stars with a positive declination of more than +(90-X)° are never in the sky. All stars with a declination between -(90-X)° are never in the sky. All stars with a declination between -(90-X)° and +(90-X)° rise and set and are sometimes in the sky and sometimes not in the sky.

If you are standing on the Equator, which is at 0°, then all stars with a declination between +(90-0)° and -(90-0)°; that is, between +90° and -90°, rise and set and are sometimes in the sky and sometimes not in the sky. But declinations between +90° and -90° are all there are, so that at the Equator, *all* the stars are in the sky at some time or another, all of them making circles that are perpendicular to the horizon.

It is only at the Equator that all stars in the sky can be seen at one time or another. (In actual fact, stars near the Celestial Poles would, as seen from the Equator, be always near the horizon and would therefore be difficult to observe — but we are ignoring horizon-effects.)

It works the other way around, too. Suppose a star has a declination of +60°. That means it is 30 degrees from the North Celestial Pole. When the North Celestial Pole is more than 30 degrees above the northern horizon, the star must always remain above the horizon. For it to dip below the horizon, it would have to move to a position that is more than 30 degrees from the North Celestial Pole, which is impossible.

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The North Celestial Pole is just 30 degrees above the northern horizon when you are standing at 30° N on the surface of the Earth. Anywhere on Earth from 30° N northward, the star with a declination of +60° is always in the sky. Anywhere on Earth from 30° S southward it is never in the sky. Anywhere on Earth between 30° N and 30° S, it rises and sets and is sometimes in the sky and sometimes not.

We can present the general rule. If a star has a declination of +X°, it is always in the sky from any point on Earth north of (90-X)°N, never in the sky from any point south of (90-X)°S, and is sometimes in the sky and sometimes not from any point between (90-X)°N and (90-X)°S.

If a star has a declination of -X°, it is always in the sky from any point south of (90-X)° S, never in the sky from any point north of (90-X)° N, and is sometimes in the sky and sometimes not from any point between (90-X)° S and (90-X)° N.

The corollary to this is that from any point in the northern hemisphere, the North Celestial Pole is always in the sky. It is at 90° N and is therefore always visible from any point north of (90-90)° N or 0°, which is the Equator — while the South Celestial Pole is never in the sky. Contrariwise, from any point in the southern hemisphere, the South Celestial Pole is always in the sky and the North Celestial Pole never is. At the Equator, both Celestial Poles are exactly at the horizon.

Another corollary is that from any point on Earth other than the North Pole and the South Pole, any star on the Celestial Equator is always seen to rise and set and is therefore seen part of the time and not seen the other part...

But now to cases. The declination of Alpha Centauri is -60° 38′, or, since there are 60 minutes of arc to a degree, we can work it out in the decimal system (which I personally prefer) and make the declination -60.63°.

By the rules we have worked out, then, Alpha Centauri is always in the sky for all latitudes south of (90-60.63)° S or 29.37° S. It is *never* in the sky for all latitudes north of 29.37° N. Finally, it rises and sets and is sometimes in the sky and sometimes not in the sky for all latitudes between 29.37° S and 29.37° N.

Next, we must ask ourselves how this relates to the United States.

The line of 29.37°N cuts across Florida at a latitude just north of Daytona Beach. I would estimate, then, that the southern two-thirds of Florida offers a view of Alpha Centauri in the sky at certain times.

So far my reviewer is right, but if he undertakes to correct my errors, he is honor-bound to make none of his own. By specifying Florida, he leaves the in-

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ference that the "lower" part of the state (to use his geographical term) is the only part of the United States from which Alpha Centauri can be seen.

Not so! The line of 29.38° N also cuts across the southernmost tip of Louisiana, about 30 miles south of New Orleans. From any point in southernmost Louisiana, including the Mississippi delta region, Alpha Centauri is sometimes visible in the sky.

We're still not through. The line of 29.38° N cuts across the state of Texas at about the latitude of Galveston and San Antonio. From any point in Texas south of those two cities, Alpha Centauri is sometimes visible in the sky.

And we're *still* not through. My reviewer may have forgotten that one of the 50 states is Hawaii and that it is the most southern of all of them. *All* of Hawaii is well south of the 29.38° N mark, and therefore Alpha Centauri is in the sky at certain times as viewed from *any* part of the state of Hawaii.

What my reviewer should have said, then, if he had really wanted to be terribly erudite, was that Alpha Centauri was visible from all or part of no less than 4 states of the 50.

Now, then, how wrong was I?

The area from which Alpha Centauri is visible, at least sometimes, I estimate to be something like this: 36,000 square miles in Florida; 4,000 square miles in Louisiana; 40,000 square miles in Texas; and 6,400 square miles in Hawaii, for a total of 86,400 square miles. This leaves an area of 3,450,000 square miles in the United States from which Alpha Centauri can never be seen.

In other words, Alpha Centauri can't be seen from 97.6 percent of the land area of the United States, and it can sometimes be seen from 2.4 percent. I think, then, that it is a pretty fair approximation to say that Alpha Centauri cannot be seen from the United States in an essay in which I don't want to get into the minutiae of when and where a star can be seen and when and where it cannot be.

In fact, we're not through. A star is seen at a maximum height above the horizon equal to the difference between the latitude at which you are located and the latitude that marks the limit from which the star can be seen.

For instance, the southernmost part of Louisiana is at a latitude of 29.0° N, so that from even the southernmost part of Louisiana, the Mississippi Delta, Alpha Centauri is never more than about 0.4 degrees above the southern horizon.

At even the southernmost point in Texas, the city of Brownsville, Alpha Centauri reaches a maximum height of 3.5° above the southern horizon and at

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the southernmost point in Florida, Key West, Alpha Centauri is never seen more than 4.3 degrees above the southern horizon.

These are *maximum* heights above the horizon.

Now it is not easy to observe stars that are very close to the horizon. Not only are there often obstructions on the horizon, but even where there are not, there is often a haze.

I should say that, in practical terms, the only portion of the 50 states from which Alpha Centauri is easily visible is Hawaii. Hawaii's area, however, makes up only 0.18 percent of the nation. Therefore, in a practical sense, Alpha Centauri is not seen in the sky from 99.82 percent of the United States.

Well, then, what ought I to have said? Ought I to have said, "Alpha Centauri cannot be seen from 97.6 percent of the United States, can be seen in theory and sometimes in fact when one is lucky, in 2.2 percent of the United States, and can be seen easily in 0.2 percent of the United States"? Ought I to have said, "Alpha Centauri cannot be seen from the United States, except from the state of Hawaii, and the southern parts of Florida, Louisiana and Texas"?

Or do you think for the purposes of the article if I say that "Alpha Centauri cannot be seen from the United States" that it is worth making a fuss over?

And if my erudite reviewer is going to make a fuss over it, how smart is he if he remembers Florida and forgets Hawaii?

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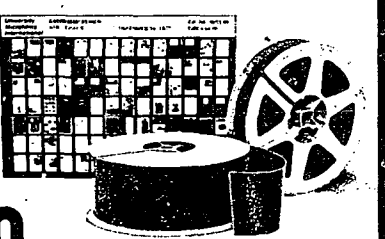

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Some people have the notion that writing is a lonely game, and it may be, which is not to say that it is non-competitive. But what about the idea of A Competition between writers? Here it is, a wild and mordant extrapolation, as Leon "The Cranker" Culp and Rex Sackett go one-on-one in front of a hundred thousand screaming fans.

Bill Pronzini and Barry Malzberg have collaborated on three published thrillers; the latest is NIGHT SCREAMS (Playboy Press). They are currently at work on a fourth, DEATH-WATCH.

Prose Bowl

BY

BILL PRONZINI and BARRY N. MALZBERG

Standing there at midfield in the Coliseum, in front of a hundred thousand screaming New-Sport fans and a TriDim audience estimated at thirty million, I felt a lot of different emotions: excitement, pride, tension, and maybe just a touch of fear. I still couldn't believe that I was here — Rex Sackett, the youngest ever to make it all the way through the playoffs to the Prose Bowl. But I'd done it, and if I cleared one more hurdle I would be the new world champion.

Just one more hurdle.

I looked across the Line at the old man. Leon Culp, better known as The Cranker. Fifty-seven years old, twenty-million words in a career spanning almost four decades. Twice defeated in the quarter-finals, once defeated in the semi-finals two years ago. His first time in the Prose Bowl too, and he was the sentimental favorite. I was just a kid, an upstart; by all rights, a lot of the scribes had been saying, I didn't deserve to be here at my age. But the odds-makers had made me a 3-2 favorite because of my youth and

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stamina and the way I had handled my opponents in the playoffs. And because there were also a lot of people who felt The Cranker couldn't win the big ones; that he depended too much on the Fuel now, that he was pretty near washed up and had made it this far only because of weak competition.

Maybe all of that was true, but I wasn't so sure. Leon Culp had always been my idol; I had grown up reading and studying him, and in his time — and despite his misfortune in past Prose Bowl races — he was the best there was. I'd been in awe of him when I was a wet-behind-the-ears kid in the Junior Creative Leagues, and I was still a little in awe of him now.

It wasn't that I lacked confidence in myself. I had plenty of confidence, and plenty of desire too; I wanted to win not only for myself and the $100,000 championship prize, but for Sally, and for Mort Taylor, the best agent in the business, and most of all for Mom and Dad, who had supported me during those first five lean years when I was struggling in the semi-pros. Still, I couldn't seem to shake that sense of nervous wonder. This wasn't any ordinary pro I was about to go up against. This was The Cranker.

It was almost time for the Face-Off to begin. The PA announcer introduced me first, because as the youngest of the contestants I was wearing the visitor's red, and I stepped out and waved at the packed stands. There was a chorus of cheers, particularly from over in G Section where Sally and Mort and the folks were sitting with the Sackett Boosters. The band struck up my old school song; I felt my eyes dampen as I listened.

When the announcer called out The Cranker's name, the cheers were even louder — but there were a few catcalls mixed in too. He didn't seem to pay any attention either way. He just stood without moving, his seamed old face set in stoic determination. In his blue uniform tunic, outlined against the hot New Year's Day sky, he looked bigger than he really was — awesome, implacable. Unbeatable.

Everybody stood up for the National Anthem. Then there was another uproar from the fans — I'd never imagined how deafening it could get down here on the floor of the Prose Bowl — and finally the head Editor trotted out and called us over for the coin flip. I called Tails in the air, and the coin fell to the turf and came up Tails. The Head Editor moved over to me and patted my shoulders to indicate I'd won the toss; the Sackett Boosters bellowed their approval. Through all of this, Culp remained motionless and aloof, not looking at me or the Head Editor or anything else, it seemed.

We went back to the Line and got ready. I was becoming more and more tense as the Face-Off neared; the palms of my hands were slick and my head seemed empty. What if I can't think of a title? I thought. What if I can't think of an opening sentence?

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"Be cool, kid," Mort Taylor had told me earlier. "Don't try to force it. The words'll come, just like they always have."

The Cranker and I stood facing each other, looking at the huge electronic scoreboards at opposite ends of the field. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Head Editor wave his red starting flag at the Line Editor; and in the next instant the two plot topics selected by the officials flashed on the board.

A. FUTURISTIC LOVE-ADVENTURE

B. MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY DETECTIVE

I had five seconds to make my choice. Both of the topics looked tough, but this was the Prose Bowl and nothing came easy in the championship. I made an arbitrary selection and yelled out "Plot B!" to the Head Editor. He unfurled his white flag with the letter B on it, and immediately the PA announcer's voice boomed, "Rex Sackett chooses Plot B!"

The crowd broke into thunderous applause; the sound of it was like a pressure against my eardrums. I could feel my pulse racing in hard irregular rhythm and my stomach was knotted up. I tried not to think about the thirty million people watching me on the Tri-Dim close-ups.

The Line Editor's claxon went off.

The Cranker and I broke for our typewriters. And all of a sudden, as I was sliding into my chair, I felt control and a kind of calm come into me. That was the way it always was with me, the way it always was with the great ones, Mort had said: no matter how nervous you were before the start of a match, once the horn sounded your professionalism took over and you forgot everything except the job you had to do.

I had a title even before I reached for the first sheet of paper beside the typewriter, and I had the first sentence as soon as I rolled the sheet into the platen. I fired out the title — THE MICAWBER DIAMOND — jabbed down the opening sentence and the rest of the narrative hook, and was into the second paragraph before I heard Culp's machine begin its amplified hammering across the Line.

A hundred thousand voices screamed for speed and continuity. The Cranker's rooting section and the Sackett Boosters made the most noise; I knew Sally would be leading the cheers on my side, and I had a sharp mental image of her in her red-and-white sweater with the big S on the front. Sweet, wonderful Sally....

I hunched forward, teeth locked around the stem of my old briar, and drove through two more paragraphs of stage-setting. End of page one. I glanced up at the south-end scoreboard as I ripped the sheet out of the platen and rolled in a new one. SACKETT 226, CULP 187. I laid in half a page of flashback, working the adjectives and the adverbs to build up my count, power-

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ed through eight lines of descriptive transition, and came into the first passage of dialogue. Up on the board, what I was writing appeared in foot-high electronic printout, as if the words were emblazoned on the sky itself.

SAM SLEDGE STALKED ACROSS HIS PLUSH OFFICE, LEAVING FOOTPRINTS IN THE THICK SHAG CARPET LIKE ANGRY DOUGHNUTS. VELDA VANCE, ALLURINGLY BEAUTIFUL SECRETARY TO SLEDGE AND CHANDLER INVESTIGATIONS, LOOKED UP IN ALARM. "SOMEBODY MURDERED MILES CHANDLER LAST NIGHT," HE GRITTED TO HER, "AND STOLE THE MICAWBER DIAMOND HE WAS GUARDING."

It was solid stuff, I knew that. Not my best, but plenty good enough and just what the fans wanted. The sound of my name echoing through the great stadium put chills on my back.

"Sackett! Hack it! Sackett, hack it! Sackett hack it Sackett hack it!"

I finished the last line on page two and had the clean sheet into the machine in two seconds flat. My eyes found the scoreboard again as I pounded the keys: SACKETT 529, CULP 430. Hundred-word lead, but that was nothing in this early going. Without losing speed or concentration, I sneaked a look at what The Cranker was punching out.

THE DENEBIAN GREEN-BEAST CAME TOWARD HER, MOVING WITH A CURIOUSLY FLOWING MOTION, ITS TENTACLES SWAYING IN A SENSUAL DANCE OF ALIEN LUST. SHE STOOD FROZEN AGAINST A RUDDER OF ROCK AND STARED AT THE THING IN HORROR. THE UNDULATING TENTACLES REACHED TOWARD HER AND THE GREEN WAVES OF DAMP WHICH THE BEAST EXUDED SENT SHUDDERS THROUGH HER.

God, I thought, that's top-line prose. He's inspired, he's pulling out all the stops.

The crowd sensed it too. I could hear his cheerleaders chanting, almost drowning out the cries from my own rooters across the way.

"Come on, Culp! Write that pulp!"

I was in the most intense struggle of my life, there was no doubt about that. I'd known it was going to be rough, but knowing it and then being in the middle of it were two different things. The Cranker was a legend in his own time; when he was right, no one had his facility, his speed, his edge with the cutting transitions, his ability to produce under stress. If he could maintain pace and narrative drive, there wasn't a writer on earth who could beat him—

SACKETT 920, CULP 874.

The score registered on my mind, and I realized with a jolt that my own pace had slacked off: Culp had cut my lead by more than half. That was what

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happened to you when you started worrying about your opponent and what he was doing. I could hear Mort's voice again, echoing in my memory: "The pressure will turn your head, kid, if you let it. But I don't think it will. I think you're made of the real stuff; I think you've got the guts and the heart."

THE ANGER ON MICAWBER'S FACE MELTED AWAY LIKE SOAP IN A SOAP DISH UNDER A STREAM OF HOT DIRTY WATER.

I jammed out that line and I knew I was back in the groove, beginning to crank near the top of my form. The sound of my machine climbed to a staccato pulse. Dialogue, some fast foreshadowing, a string of four adjectives that drew a burst of applause from the Sackett Boosters. I could feel my wrists starting to knot up from the strain, and there was pain in my left leg where I'd pulled a hamstring during the semi-final match against the Kansas City Flash. But I didn't pay any attention to that; I had written in pain before and I wasn't about to let it bother me now. I just kept firing out my prose.

Only I wasn't gaining back any of my lead, I saw then. The foot-high numerals read SACKETT 1163, CULP 1127. The Cranker had hit his stride too, and he was matching me word for word, sentence for sentence.

SHE HAD NO MORE STRENGTH LEFT TO RUN. SHE WAS TRAPPED NOW, THERE WAS NO ESCAPE. A SCREAM BURST FROM HER THROAT AS THE BEAST BOUNDED UP TO HER AND DREW HER INTO ITS AWFUL CLUTCHES, BREATHING GREEN FUMES AGAINST HER FACEPLATE. IT WAS GOING TO WORK ITS WILL ON HER! IT WAS GOING TO DO UNSPEAKABLE THINGS TO HER BODY!

"Culp, Culp, Culp!"

THE NIGHT WAS DARK AND WET AND COLD AND THE RAIN FELL ON SLEDGE LIKE A MILLION TEARS FROM A MILLION LOST LOVES ON A MILLION WORLDS IN A MILLION GALAXIES.

"Sackett, Sackett, Sackett!"

Sweat streamed into my eyes, made the numerals on the board seem smeared and glistening: SACKETT 1895, CULP 1857. I ducked my head against the sleeve of my tunic and slid a new sheet into the machine. On the other side of the Line, The Cranker was sitting straight and stiff behind his typewriter, fingers flying, his shaggy head wreathed in cigarette smoke. But he wasn't just hitting the keys, he was *attacking* them — as if they, not me, were the enemy and he was trying to club them into submission.

I reached back for a little extra, raced through the rest of the transition, slammed out three paragraphs of introspection and five more of dialogue. New page. More dialogue, then another narrative hook to foreshadow the first confrontation scene. New page. Description and some cat-and-

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mouse action to build suspense.

AS HE WAITED IN THE DARK ALLEY FOR THE GUY WHO WAS FOLLOWING HIM, SLEDGE'S RIGHT HAND ITCHED AROUND THE GUN IN HIS POCKET. HE COULD FEEL THE OLD FAMILIAR RAGE BURNING INSIDE HIM, MAKING HIS BLOOD BOIL LIKE WATER IN A KETTLE ON THE OLD WOOD-BURNING STOVE IN HIS OLD MAN'S FOURTH-FLOOR WALK-UP IN

My typewriter locked. I heard the cheering rise to a crescendo; two hundred thousand hands commenced clapping as the Line Editor's horn blared.

End of the first quarter.

SACKETT 2500, CULP 2473.

I leaned back in my chair, sleeving more wetness from my face, and took several deep breaths. The Cranker had got to his feet. He stood in a rigid posture, a fresh cigarette between his lips, and squinted toward the sidelines. His Seconds were already on the field, running toward him with water bucket and a container of Fuel.

My own Seconds reached me a short time later. One of them extended Fuel, but even though my mouth was dry, sandy, I shook my head and gestured him away. Mort and I had agreed that I should hold off on the Fuel as long as possible; it was part of the game plan we had worked out.

By the time I finished splashing water on my face and toweling off, there was less than a minute of the time-out left. I looked over at G Section. I couldn't pick Mom and Dad out of the sea of faces, or Sally or Mort either, but just knowing they were there was enough.

I took my place, knocked dottle out of the briar, tamped in some fresh tobacco, and fired it. My mind was already racing, working ahead — a full four sentences when Culp sat down again and the Head Editor raised the red starting flag.

Claxon.

THE OLD NEIGHBORHOOD: THE FOLLOWER HAD SOMETHING TO DO WITH HIS PARTNER'S MURDER AND THE THEFT OF THE DIAMOND, SLEDGE WAS SURE OF THAT. HE WAS GOING TO GET SOME ANSWERS NOW, ONE WAY OR ANOTHER.

And I was off, banging my machine at the same feverish pace of the first period. I cut through a full page of action, interspersing it with dialogue, drawing it out; the scene was good for another 500 words, at least. Twelve pages down and the thirteenth in the typewriter. My quality level was still good, but when I glanced up at the board, I saw that The Cranker was once again cranking at the top of his form.

BUT EVEN WHILE SHE WAS CLINGING TO THE STARFLEET CAPTAIN WHO HAD SAVED HER LIFE, SHE FELT A STRANGE SADNESS. THE GREEN-BEAST

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HAD BEEN DISINTEGRATED AND WAS NOTHING MORE NOW THAN A PUDDLE OF GREEN ON THE DUSTY SANDS OF DENEB, LIKE A SPLOTCH OF PAINT ON AN ALIEN CANVAS. THE HORROR WAS OVER. AND YET... AND YET, DESPITE HER REVULSION, THE THING HAD STIRRED SOMETHING DEEP AND PRIMITIVE INSIDE HER THAT SHE WAS ONLY JUST BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND.

"Culp, Culp — crank that pulp!"

My lead had dwindled to a mere twelve words: the scoreboard read SACKETT 3359, CULP 3347. The Cranker was making his move now, and he was doing it despite the fact that I was working at maximum speed.

The feeling of tension and uncertainty began to gnaw at me again. I fought it down, concentrated even more intensely, punching the keys so hard that pain shot up both wrists. Fresh sweat rolled off me; the hot sun lay on the back of my neck like a burning hand.

SLEDGE SNARLED, "YOU'LL TALK, ALL RIGHT!" AND SWATTED THE GUY ACROSS THE HEAD WITH HIS FORTY-FIVE. THE GUY REELED AND STAGGERED INTO THE WET ALLEY WALL. SLEDGE MOVED IN, TRANSFERRING THE GUN TO HIS LEFT HAND. HE HIT THE FOLLOWER A SECOND TIME, HIT HIM IN THE MOUTH WITH A HAND LIKE A FIST

The Head Editor's whistle blew.

And my typewriter locked, jamming my fingers.

Penalty. Penalty!

My throat closed up. I snapped my head over toward the sidelines and saw the ten-second penalty flag waving — the green-and-black one that meant "Phrasing Unacceptable." The crowd was making a magnified sound that was half excited, half groaning; I knew the TriDim cameras would have homed in on me for a series of close-ups. I could feel my face reddening. First penalty of the match and I had let it happen to me.

But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that it was going to cost me the lead: The Cranker's typewriter was still clattering on at white heat, churning out words and sentences that flashed like taunts on the board.

I counted off the seconds in my mind, and when the Head Editor's flag dropped and my machine unlocked, I flailed the keys angrily, rewriting the penalty sentence: HE HIT THE FOLLOWER A SECOND TIME, HIT HIM IN THE MOUTH WITH A HAND LIKE A CEMENT BLOCK. But the damage had been done, all right. The board told me that and told everyone else too.

CULP 3899, SACKETT 3878.

The penalty seemed to have energized The Cranker, given him a psychological lift; he was working faster than ever now, with even more savagery. I felt a little wrench of fear.

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About the only way you could beat one of the greats was to take the lead early on and hold it. Once an experienced old pro like Culp got in front, the advantage was all his.

A quote dropped into my mind, one I'd read a long time ago in an Old-Sports history text, and it made me shiver: "Going up against the best is a little bit like going up against Death."

I had my own speed back now, but my concentration wasn't as sharp as it had been before the penalty; a couple of times I hit the wrong keys, misspelled words and then had to retype them. It was just the kind of penalty-reaction Mort had warned me against. "Penalties don't mean a thing," he'd said. "What you've got to watch out for is worrying about them, letting them dam up the flow or lead you into another mistake."

But it wasn't Mort out here in the hot Prose Bowl sun. It wasn't Mort going head-to-head against a legend....

The amplified sound of Culp's machine seemed louder than my own, steadier, more rhythmic. Nervously I checked the board again. His stuff was coming so fast now that it might have been written by one of the experimental prose-computers instead of a pulpeteer.

SHE LOOKED OUT THROUGH THE SHIP'S VIEWSCREEN AT THE EMPTY SWEEP OF SPACE. BEHIND HER SHE COULD HEAR THE CAPTAIN TALKING TO THE BASE COMMANDER AT EARTH COLONY SEVEN, RELAYING THE INFORMATION ABOUT THE SHUTTLE-SHIP CRASH ON DENEB. "ONLY ONE SURVIVOR," HE WAS SAYING. YES, SHE THOUGHT, ONLY ONE SURVIVOR. BUT I WISH THERE HADN'T BEEN ANY. IF I'D DIED IN THE CRASH TOO, THEN I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ATTACKED BY THE GREEN-BEAST. AND I WOULDN'T BE FEELING THESE STRANGE AND TERRIBLE EMOTIONS, THIS SENSE OF UNFULFILLMENT AND DEPRIVATION.

Some of the fans were on their feet, screaming *"Cranker! Cranker!"*

CULP 4250, SACKETT 4196.

I felt light-headed, giddy with tension; but the adrenalin kept flowing and the words kept coming, pouring out of my subconscious and through the mind-haze and out into the blazing afternoon — nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs. Don't let him gain any more ground. Stay close. Stay close!

SLEDGE FOLLOWED THE FAT MAN THROUGH THE HEAVY DARKNESS ALONG THE RIVER. THE STENCH OF FISH AND MUD AND GARBAGE WAFTED UP FROM THE OILY BLACK WATER AND SLAPPED HIM ACROSS THE FACE LIKE A DIRTY WET TOWEL. HE DIDN'T KNOW WHERE THE FAT MAN WAS LEADING HIM, BUT I FELT SURE IT

Whistle.

Lock.

Penalty.

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I looked up in disbelief and saw the Head Editor waving the purple-and-gold penalty flag that signified "Switched Person." A smattering of boos rolled down around me from the stands. My eyes flicked to the board, and it was true, I had slipped out of third person and into first — an amateur's mistake, a kid's blunder. Shame made me duck my head; it was as if, in that moment, I could feel concentrated waves of disgust from the sixty million eyes that watched me.

The ten seconds of the penalty were like a hundred, a thousand. Because all the while The Cranker's machine ratcheted onward, not once slowing or breaking cadence. When my typewriter finally unlocked, I redid the sentence in the proper person and plunged ahead without checking the score. I didn't want to know how far behind I was now. I was afraid that if I did know, it would make me reckless with urgency and push me into another stupid error.

My throat was parched, raw and hot from pipe smoke, and for the first time I thought about the Fuel. It had been a long time since I'd wanted it in the first half of a Face-Off, but I wanted it now. Only I couldn't have it, not until halftime, not without taking a disastrous 20-second Fuel penalty. There had to be less than 600 words left to the end of the quarter, I told myself; I could hold out that long. A top-line pro could do 600 words no matter what the circumstances. A top-line pro, as The Cranker himself had once said, could do 600 words *dead*.

I forced myself to shut out everything from my mind except the prose, the story line. Old page out of the platen, new page in. Old page out, new page in. Speed, speed, but make sure of the grammar, the tense, the phrasing. Still a full 5000 words to go in the match. Still an even chance for a second-half comeback.

THE INTERIOR OF THE WAREHOUSE WAS DANK AND MUSTY AND FILLED WITH CROUCHING SHADOWS LIKE A PLATOON OF EVIL SPIRITS WAITING TO LEAP ON HIM. THEN THERE WAS A FLICKER OF LIGHT AT THE REAR AND IT TOLD SLEDGE THE FAT MAN HAD SWITCHED ON A SMALL POCKET FLASH. GUN IN HAND, HE CREPT STEALTHILY TOWARD THE

My machine locked again.

I jerked my head up, half expecting to see a penalty flag aloft for the third time. But it wasn't a penalty; it was halftime at last. The Line Editor's horn blew. The Cranker's cheering section was chanting *"Culp, Culp, Culp!"*

I had to look at the board then, at the score shining against the sky, and I did: CULP 5000, SACKETT 4796.

Some of the tension drained out of me and I sat there feeling limp, heavy with fatigue. The joints in my fingers were stiff; there was a spot of blood on the tip of my right forefinger where the

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skin had split near the nail. But the score was all that mattered to me at that moment, and it wasn't as bad as I'd feared. Only 204 words down. I had made up larger margins than that in my career; I could do it again.

Across the Line, Culp was on his feet and staring down at the turf with eyes that gleamed and didn't blink. He wasn't quite so imposing now, strangely. His back was bowed and his hands looked a little shaky — as though he was the one who was trailing by 204 words and facing an uphill battle in the second half.

When I pushed back my own chair and stood up, a sudden sharp pain in my tender hamstring made me clutch at the table edge. I was soaked in sweat and so thirsty I had trouble swallowing. But I didn't reach for the Fuel when my Seconds appeared; in spite of my need I didn't want to take any while I was out here, didn't want to show The Cranker and the crowd and the TriDim audience that I needed it. In the locker room, yes. Just another few minutes.

Two of Culp's Seconds began escorting him off the field toward the tunnel at the south end; he was hanging onto his Fuel container with both hands. I waved away my people and hobbled toward the north tunnel alone.

Fans showered me with roses and confetti as I came into the tunnel. That was a good sign; they hadn't given up on me. The passageway was cool, a welcome relief from the blazing sun, and empty except for the two guards who were stationed there to keep out fans, New-Sport reporters, and anyone else who might try to see me. The Prose Bowl rules were strict: each of the contestants had to spend halftime alone, locked in his respective locker room without typewriter or any other kind of writing tools. Back in '26, the year of the Postal-Rate Riots, a pro named Penny-A-Word Gordon had been disqualified for cheating when officials found out another wordsmith, hired by Gordon's agent, had written a fast 1000-word continuation during the break and delivered it to Gordon, who then revised it with a pen, memorized it, and used it to build up an early third-quarter lead. The incident had caused a pretty large scandal at the time, and the Prose Bowl people weren't about to let it happen again.

As soon as I came into the locker room, the familiar writer's-office odors of sweat, stale tobacco, and spilled Fuel assailed me and made me feel a little better. The Prose Bowl officials were also careful about creating the proper atmosphere; they wanted each of the contestants to feel at home. Behind me the door panel whispered shut and locked itself electronically, but I was already on my way to where the Fuel container sat waiting on the desk.

I measured out three ounces, tossed it off, and waited for it to work its magic. It didn't take long; the last of

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the tension and most of the lassitude were gone within seconds. I poured out another three ounces, set it aside, and stripped off my sodden uniform.

While I was showering I thought about The Cranker. His performance in the first half had been flawless: no penalties, unflaging speed, front-line prose. Even his detractors wouldn't be able to find fault with it, or even the slightest indication that he was washed up and about to wilt under the pressure.

So if I was going to beat him I had to do it on talent and speed and desire — all on my own. Nothing came easy in this business or in the Prose Bowl; I'd known that all along. You had to work long and hard if you wanted to win. You had to give your all, and try to stay away from the penalties, and hope that you were good enough and strong enough to come out on top.

No, The Cranker wasn't going to beat himself. And I wasn't going to beat myself either.

I steped out of the shower, toweled dry, bandaged the wound on my right forefinger, put on a clean tunic, and took the rest of my allotted Fuel an ounce at a time. I could feel my confidence building, solidifying again.

The digital clock on one wall said that there were still nine minutes left in the time-out. I paced around, flexing my leg to keep the hamstring from tightening up. It was quiet in there, almost too quiet — and suddenly I found myself thinking how alone I was. I wished Mort was there so we could discuss strategy; I wished the folks and Sally were there so I could tell them how I felt, how self-assured I was.

But even if they were here, I thought then, would it really make a difference? I'd still be alone, wouldn't I? You were always alone in the pros; your parents, your agent, the Editors, the girl you loved, all of them gave you as much help and support as they could — but they weren't pulpeteers and they just didn't know what it was like to go out time after time and face the machine, the blank sheets of paper, the pressure and pain of millions of words and hundreds of Face-Offs. The only ones who did know what it was like were other pros; only your own could truly understand.

Only your own.

The Cranker?

Were we really opponents, enemies? Or were we soul brothers, bound more closely than any blood relatives because we shared the same basic loneliness?

It was an unnerving thought and I pushed it out of my head. I couldn't go out there and face Culp believing we were one and the same. It would be like going up against myself, trying to overcome myself in a contest that no one could ever win....

The door panel unlocked finally, just as the three-minute warning horn blew, and I hurried out of the locker room, down the tunnel past the silent

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guards and back into the stadium. The last of the marching bands and majorettes were just filing off onto the sidelines. The fans were buzzing, and when they saw me emerge and trot out toward the Line, there were cheers and applause, and the Sackett band began playing my old school song again.

Culp wasn't there yet. But as I reached the Line and took my position, I heard the roar from the stands intensify and his rooting section set up a chant: *"Cranker! Cranker!"* Then I saw him, coming out of the south tunnel, not running but walking in a loose rapid gait. Halfway out, he seemed to stagger just a little, then regained his stride. When he stopped across from me I saw that his eyes were still bright and fixed, like shiny nailheads in a block of old gray wood. I wondered how much Fuel he'd had during the time-out. Not that it mattered; it wouldn't have been enough to make a difference.

The Head Editor walked out carrying his flags. I lit my pipe and Culp fired a cigarette; we were both ready. The crowd noise subsided as the Head Editor raised his red flag — and then surged again as the flag fell and the claxon sounded.

The second half was underway.

My mind was clear and sharp as I dropped into my chair. I had checked my prose printout, waiting at the Line, and I had the rest of my unfinished halftime sentence and the rest of the paragraph already worked out; I punched it down, followed it with three fast paragraphs of descriptive narrative. Build into another action-confrontation scene? No. I was only at the halfway point in the story line, and it would throw my pacing off. I laid in a deft one-line twist, for shock value, and cut away into transition.

"That's it, Sackett! That's how to hack it!"

The approving cheers from the Sackett Boosters and from the rest of the fans were like a fresh shot of Fuel: I could feel my thoughts expanding, settling squarely into the groove. Words poured out of me; phrases, sentences, crisp images. The beat of my typewriter was steady, unrelieved, like a peal of thunder rolling across the hot blue sky.

But it wasn't the only thunder in the Prose Bowl, I realized abruptly. The Cranker's machine was making it too — louder, faster, even more intense. For the first time since the quarter had begun I glanced up at the score.

CULP 6132, SACKETT 5898.

I couldn't believe it. I had been certain that I was cutting into his lead, that I had closed to within at least 175 words; instead Culp had widened the margin by another 30. The thin edge of fear cut at me again, slicing through the confidence and that feeling of controlled power I always had when I was going good. I was throwing everything I had at the Cranker here in the third period, and it wasn't good enough —

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he was still pulling away.

I bit down so hard on the stem of my briar that I felt it crack between my teeth. Keep bearing down, I told myself grimly. Don't let up for a second.

HE WAS STILL THINKING ABOUT THE CASE, TRYING TO PUT THE PIECES TOGETHER, WHEN THE TELEPHONE RANG. IT WAS VELDA. "I'VE BEEN WORRIED ABOUT YOU, SAM," HER SOFT PURRING VOICE SAID, AND ALL AT ONCE HE FELT A BURNING NEED TO SEE HER. SHE WAS THE ONLY PERSON HE COULD TALK TO, THE ONE PERSON IN THE WORLD WHO UNDERSTOOD HOW HE FELT.

"Sackett, Sackett!"

But The Cranker's machine kept on soaring; The Cranker's words kept on racing across the board with relentless speed.

WHEN SHE WAS SURE THE CAPTAIN WAS ASLEEP SHE GOT OUT OF THE BUNK AND PADDED OVER TO WHERE HIS UNIFORM LAY. SHE KNEW WHAT SHE HAD TO DO NOW. SHE ACCEPTED THE TRUTH AT LAST, BECAUSE THE WHOLE TIME SHE HAD BEEN COPULATING WITH THE CAPTAIN HER THOUGHTS HAD BEEN BACK ON DENEB, FULL TO THE SIGHT AND THE SMELL OF GREEN.

"Culp, Culp, Culp!"

The lift from the six ounces of Fuel I'd had in the locker room was gone now and the tension was back, binding the muscles in my fingers and shoulders. The sun seemed to be getting hotter, drawing tunnels of sweat from my pores, making my head throb. My words were still coming fast, but the images weren't quite as sharp as they'd been minutes ago, the quality level not quite as high. I didn't care. Speed was all that mattered now; I was willing to sacrifice quality for the maintenance of speed.

CULP 6912, SACKETT 6671.

Down by 241 now; The Cranker had only gained seven words in the last 800. But *he* had gained them, not I — I couldn't seem to narrow his lead, no matter what I did. I lifted my head, still typing furiously, and stared across at him. His teeth were bared; sweat glistened like oil on his gray skin. Yet his fingers were a sunlit blur on the keys, as if they were independent creatures performing a mad dance.

CLENCHING THE CAPTAIN'S LASER WEAPON IN HER HAND, SHE MADE HER WAY AFT TO WHERE THE LIFECRAFT WERE KEPT. SHE KNEW THE COORDINATES FOR DENEB. SHE WOULD ORDER THE LIFECRAFT'S COMPUTER TO TAKE HER THERE — TAKE HER TO THE PROMISE OF THE GREEN.

A feeling of desperation came into me. Time was running out; there were less than 500 words left to go in the quarter, less than 3000 left in the match. You could make up 250 words

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in the fourth period of a Face-Off, but you couldn't do it unless you had momentum. And I didn't have it, I couldn't seem to get it. It all belonged to The Cranker.

The fans continued to shriek, creating a wild counterpoint to the thunder of our machines. I imagined I could hear Mort's voice telling me to hold on, keep cranking, and Dad's voice hoarse from shouting, and Sally's voice saying "You can do it, darling, you can do it!"

CULP 7245, SACKETT 7002.

Holding. Down 245 now, but holding.

You can do it, you can do it!

SLEDGE'S EYES GLOWED AS HE LOOKED AT VELDA'S MAGNIFICIENT BOSOM. VELDA, THE ONLY WOMAN HE'D WANTED SINCE HIS WIFE LEFT HIM THREE YEARS BEFORE BECAUSE SHE COULDN'T STAND HIS JOB AND THE KIND OF PEOPLE HE DEALT WITH. THE PALMS OF HIS HANDS WERE WET, HOT AND WET WITH DESIRE.

The palms of my hands were hot and wet, but I didn't dare take the time to wipe them dry. Only 150 to go in the quarter now.

HE TOOK HER INTO HIS ARMS. THE FEEL OF HER VOLUPTUOUS BODY WAS EXQUISITE. HE CRUSHED HIS MOUTH AGAINST HERS, HEARD HER MOAN AS HIS HAND CAME UP AND SLID ACROSS THE CURVE OF HER BREAST. "TAKE ME, SAM," SHE BREATHED HUSKILY AGAINST HIS LIPS. "TEAR MY CLOTHES OFF AND GIVE ME YOUR HOT

I tore page twenty-six out of the typewriter, slapped in page twenty-seven.

LOVE. GIVE IT TO ME NOW, SAM!"

SLEDGE WANTED TO DO JUST THAT. BUT SOMETHING HELD HIM BACK. THEN HE HEARD IT — A SOUND OUT IN THE HALLWAY, A FURTIVE SCRABBLING SOUND LIKE A RAT MAKES. YEAH, HE THOUGHT, A HUMAN RAT. HE LET GO OF VELDA, PULLED OUT HIS FORTY-FIVE, AND SPUN AROUND IN A CROUCH.

My machine locked the instant after I touched the period key; the Line Editor's horn sounded.

The third quarter was over.

I sagged in my chair, only half aware of the crowd noise swelling around me, and peered up at the board. The printout and the numerals blazed like sparks of fire in the sunlight.

CULP 7500, SACKETT 7255.

A deepening fatigue seeped through me, dulling my thoughts. Dimly I saw The Cranker leaning forward across his typewriter, head cradled in his arms; his whole body heaved as if he couldn't get enough air into his lungs. What were the New-Sport announcers saying about him on the TriDim telecast? Did they believe he could main-

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tain his grueling pace for another full quarter?

Did they think I still had a chance to win?

Down 245 with only 2500 left....

Culp took his Fuel sitting down this time, with his head tilted back and his throat working spasmodically. I did the same; I felt that if I stood up my knees would buckle and I would sprawl out like a clown. The game plan called for no more than three ounces at the third-quarter break — none at all if I could hold off — but neither of us had counted on me being down as far as I was. I took a full six ounces, praying it would shore up my flagging strength, and even then I had to force myself not to make it nine or ten.

Only it didn't do anything for me, as it had at halftime and as it usually did in competition. No lift at all. My mind remained sluggish and the muscles in my arms and wrists wouldn't relax. The only effect it had was to make my head pound and my stomach feel queasy.

With a minute of the time-out left I loaded my pipe, put a match to the tobacco. The smoke tasted foul and made my head throb all the more painfully. I laid the pipe down and did some slow deep-breathing. On his side of the Line Culp was lighting a fresh cigarette off the butt of an old one. He looked shrunken now, at least ten years older than his age of 57 — not formidable at all.

You don't awe me anymore, I told him mentally, trying to psych myself up. I can beat you because I'm as good as you are, I'm *better* than you are. Better, old man, you hear me?

He didn't look at me. he hadn't looked at me once during the entire Face-Off.

The Head Editor's red flag went up. I poised my hands at the ready, shaking my head in an effort to clear away some of the fuzziness. The screaming voices of the fans seemed almost hysterical, full of anticipation and a kind of hunger, like animals waiting for the kill.

All right, I thought, this is it.

The red flag dropped and claxon blared.

ALL RIGHT, SLEDGE THOUGHT, THIS IS IT. HE

And my mind went blank.

My hands started to tremble; body fluid streamed down my cheeks. Think of a sentence, for God's sake! But it was as if my brain had contracted, squeezed up into a tiny clotted mass that blocked off all subconscious connection.

The Cranker's machine was making thunder again.

HE

Nothing.

"Come on, Sackett! Hack it, hack it!"

HE

HE

Block. I was blocked.

Panic surged through me. I hadn't had a block since my first year in the

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semi-pro Gothic Romance League; I'd never believed it could happen to me in the Bigs. All the symptoms came rushing in on the heels of the panic: feeling of suffocation, pain in my chest, irregular breathing, nausea, strange sounds coming unbidden from my throat that were the beginnings, not the endings of words.

A volley of boos thudded against my eardrums, like rocks of sound stinging, hurting. I could feel myself whimpering; I had the terrible sensation of imminent collapse across my typewriter.

The stuttering roar of Culp's machine ceased for two or three seconds as he pulled out a completed page and inserted new paper, then began again with a vengeance.

A fragment of memory disgorged itself from the clotted mass inside my head: Mort's voice saying to me a long time ago, "To break a block, you begin at the beginning. Subject. Object. Noun. Verb. Preposition. Participle. Take one word at a time, build a sentence, and pretty soon the rest will come."

Subject.
Noun. Pronoun.
HE
Verb. Verb.
WENT
HE WENT
Preposition.
TO
HE WENT TO
Object.

THE DOOR AND THREW IT OPEN AND THE FAT MAN WAS THERE, CROUCHED AT THE EDGE OF THE STAIRCASE, A GUN HELD IN HIS FAT FIST. SLEDGE FELT THE RAGE EXPLORE INSIDE HIM. HE DODGED OUT INTO THE HALLWAY, RAISING HIS FORTY-FIVE. THE BIG MAN WOULD FEEL SLEDGE'S FIRE IN HIS FAT PRETTY SOON NOW.

"Sackett, Sackett, Sackett!"

It had all come back in a single wrenching flood; the feeling of mind-shrinkage was gone, and along with it the suffocation, the chest pain, the nausea. But the panic was still there. I had broken the momentary block, I was firing again at full speed but how much time had I lost? How many more words had I fallen behind?

I was afraid to look up at the board. And yet I *had* to know the score, I had to know if I still had any kind of chance. Fearfully I lifted my eyes, blinking away sweat.

CULP 8015, SACKETT 7369.

The panic dulled and gave way to despair. 650 words down, with less than 2000 to go and The Cranker showing no signs of weakening. Hopeless — it was hopeless.

I was going to lose.

Most of the fans were standing, urging Culp on with great booming cries of his name; they sounded even hungrier now. It struck me then that they wanted to see him humiliate me, pour it on and crush me by a thousand

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words or more. Well, I wasn't going to give them that satisfaction. I wouldn't be disgraced in front of Mort and my girl and family and thirty million TriDim viewers. I wouldn't quit.

In a frenzy I pounded out the last few lines on page thirty, ripped it free and replaced it. Action, action — draw the scene out for at least three more pages. Adjectives, adverbs, similes. Words. Words.

SLEDGE KICKED THE FAT MAN IN THE GROIN AND SENT HIM TUMBLING DOWN THE STAIRS LIKE A BROKEN SCREAMING DOLL, SCREAMING OUT THE WORDS OF HIS PAIN.

Agony in my head, in my leg, in my wounded forefinger. Roaring in my ears that had nothing to do with the crowd.

CULP 8566, SACKETT 7930.

Gain of 20 — twenty words! I wanted to laugh, locked the sound in my throat instead, and made myself glance across at Culp. his body curved into a humpbacked C, fingers hooked into claws, expression of torment on his wet face: the strain was starting to tell on him too. But up on the board, his prose still pouring out in letters as bright as golden blood.

SHE WAS SO TIRED AS SHE TRUDGED ACROSS THE DUSTY SANDS OF DENEB, SO VERY TIRED. BUT SHE HAD TO GO ON, SHE HAD TO FIND THE GREEN. THE BRIGHT GREEN, THE BEAUTIFUL GREEN, IT SEEMED AS IF THERE HAD NEVER BEEN ANYTHING IN HER LIFE EXCEPT THE SEARCH AND THE NEED FOR THE GREEN.

I imagined again the urgent cries from Sally, from Mom and Dad: "Don't give up, Rex! There's still hope, there's still a chance!" Then they faded, and everything else seemed to fade too. I was losing all track of time and place; I felt as if I were being closed into a kind of vacuum. I couldn't hear anything, couldn't see anything but the words, always the words appearing like great and meaningless symbols on the paper and in the sky. It was just The Cranker and me now, alone together in the stadium. Winning and losing didn't even matter any more. All that mattered was the two of us and the job we were compelled to do.

Finished page out, new page in.

THE FAT MAN SAT BLEEDING AGAINST THE WALL WHERE SLEDGE'S SLUGS HAD HURLED HIM. HE WAS STILL ALIVE BUT NOT FOR LONG. "ALL RIGHT, SHAMUS," HE CROAKED, "I'M FINISHED, IT'S BIG CASINO FOR ME. BUT YOU'LL NEVER GET THE DIAMOND. I'LL TAKE IT TO HELL WITH ME FIRST."

Carriage return, tab key.

The board:

CULP 8916, SACKETT 8341.

And The Cranker's prose still coming, still running:

THE BEAST LOOMED BEFORE HER IN THE THICKET AND SHE

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FELT HER HEART SKIP A BEAT. SHE FELT DIZZY, AS IF SHE WOULD FAINT AT ANY SECOND. I CAN'T GO THROUGH WITH THIS, SHE THOUGHT. HOW CAN I GO ON LIKE THIS? I NEED

Culp's machine stopped chattering then, as if he had come to the end of a page. I was barely aware of its silence at first, but when five or six seconds had passed an awareness penetrated that it hadn't started up again. The noise from the stands seemed to have shifted cadence, to have taken on a different tenor; that penetrated too. I brought my head up and squinted across the Line.

The Cranker was sitting sideways in his chair, waving frantically at the sidelines. And as I watched, one of his Seconds came racing out with a container of Fuel. The Head Editor began waving his blue-and-yellow flag.

Fuel penalty. Culp was taking a 20-second Fuel penalty.

It was the first crack in his rigid control — but I didn't react to it one way or the other. The crack was too small and it had come too late: a 20-second penalty at this stage of the game, with the score at 8960 to 8419, wouldn't make any difference in the outcome. It might enable me to cut the final margin to 400 or less, but that was about all.

I didn't watch The Cranker take his Fuel this time; I just lowered my head and kept on punching, summoning the last reserves of my strength.

"Culp, Culp — give us the pulp!"

As soon as the chant went up from his rooters, I knew that the penalty time was about to elapse. I raised my eyes just long enough to check the score and to see The Cranker hunched over his typewriter, little drops of Fuel leaking down over his chin like lost words.

CULP 8960, SACKETT 8536.

His machine began to hammer again.

The illusion that I was about to collapse returned, but it wasn't the result of another block; it was just exhaustion and the terrific mental pressure. My speed was holding and the words were still spewing out as I headed into the final confrontation scene. They seemed jumbled to me, incoherent, but there was no lock and no penalty flag.

SLEDGE KNEW THE UGLY TRUTH NOW AND IT WAS LIKE A KNIFE CARVING PIECES FROM THE FLESH OF HIS PSYCHE. HE KNEW WHO HAD THE MICAWBER DIAMOND AND WHO HAD HELPED THE FAT MAN MURDER HIS PARTNER.

Thirty-five pages complete and thirty-six in the typewriter.

CULP 9333, SACKETT 8946.

Less than 700 words to go. The Prose Bowl was almost over. Just you and me, Cranker, I thought. Let's get it done.

More words rolled out — fifty, a hundred.

And all at once there was a collect-

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ive gasping sound from the crowd, the kind of sudden stunned reaction you hear in a packed stadium when something unexpected has happened. It got through to me, made me straighten up.

The Head Editor's brown-and-orange penalty flag, the one that meant "Confused Narrative," was up and semaphoring. I realized then that The Cranker's machine had gone silent. My eyes sought the board and read his printout in disbelief.

"I WANT YOU," SHE SAID TO THE CREATURE, "I WANT YOU AS THE SHORES OF NEPTUNE WANT THE RESTLESS PROBING SEAS AS THE SEAS WANT THE DEPTHS GARBAGE GARBAGE

I kept staring at the board, still typing, my subconscious vomiting out the words of my prose. I couldn't seem to grasp what had happened; Culp's words made no sense to me. Some of the fans were booing lustily. Over in G Section, the Sackett Boosters began chanting with renewed excitement.

"Do it, Rex! Grind that text!"

The Cranker was just sitting there behind his machine with a strange, stricken look on his face. His mouth was open, his lips moving; it seemed like he was talking to himself. Babbling to himself?

I finished page thirty-six, pulled it out blindly, and reached for another sheet of paper. Just as I brought it into the platen, Culp's machine unlocked and he hit the keys again.

But not for long.

I CAN'T WRITE THIS SHIT ANY MORE

Lock into silence. Penalty flag.

I understood: The Cranker had broken under the pressure, the crack had become a crevasse and collapsed his professional control. I had known it to happen before, but never in the Prose Bowl. And never to a pulpeteer who was only a few hundred words from victory.

CULP 9449, SACKETT 9228.

The penalty flag came down.

GARBAGE

And the flag came back up, and the boos echoed like mad epithets in the hot afternoon.

Culp's face was contorted with emotion, wet with something more than sweat — something that could only be tears. He was weeping. The Cranker was *weeping*.

A sense of tragedy, of compassion touched me. And then it was gone, erased by another perception of the radiant numerals on the board — CULP 9449, SACKETT 9296 — and a sudden jolt of discovery, belated by fatigue. I was only down by 150 words now; if The Cranker didn't recover at the end of this penalty, if he took yet another one, I would be able to pull even.

I could still beat him.

I could still win the Prose Bowl.

"IT WAS YOU ALL ALONG, VELDA," SLEDGE HAMMERED AT HER. "YOU SET MILES UP FOR THE FAT MAN. NOBODY ELSE BESIDES

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ME AND MICAWBER KNEW HE WOULD BE GUARDING THE DIAMOND THAT NIGHT, AND MICAWBER'S IN THE CLEAR."

Penalty flag down.

ALL GARBAGE

Penalty flag up.

Virgin paper into my typewriter. Words, sentences, paragraphs. Another half-page completed.

SHIT, The Cranker's printout said.

A rage of boos. And screams, cheers, from G Section.

SACKETT 9481, CULP 9449.

I'd caught up, I'd taken the lead....

VELDA REACHED INSIDE THE FRONT OF HER DRESS, BETWEEN HER MAGNIFICENT BREASTS. "YOU WANT THE DIAMOND?" SHE SCREAMED AT HIM. "ALL RIGHT, SAM, HERE IT IS!" SHE HURLED THE GLITTERING STONE AT HIM, THEN DOVE SIDEWAYS TO HER PURSE AND YANKED OUT A SMALL PEARL-HANDLED AUTOMATIC. BUT SHE NEVER HAD THE CHANCE TO USE IT. HATING HER, HATING HIMSELF, HATING THIS ROTTEN PAINFUL BUSINESS HE WAS IN, SLEDGE FIRED TWICE FROM THE HIP.

"Sackett, hack it! Sackett, hack it!"

More words. Clean page. More words.

SACKETT 9702, CULP 9449.

The Cranker was on his feet, stumbling away from his machine, stumbling around in circles on the lonely field, his hands clasped to his face, tears leaking through his shaky old fingers.

TEARS LEAKED FROM SLEDGE'S EYES AS HE LOOKED DOWN AT WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE BEAUTIFUL AND TREACHEROUS VELDA LYING ON THE FLOOR. ALL HE WANTED TO DO NOW WAS TO GET OUT OF THERE, GO HOME TO SALLY, NO, SALLY HAD LEFT HIM A LONG TIME AGO AND THERE WAS NOBODY WAITING AT HOME ANY MORE. HE WAS SO TIRED HE COULDN'T THINK STRAIGHT.

Two of Culp's Seconds had come out on the grass and were steadying him, supporting him between them. Leading him away.

New page, old words. A few more words.

SLEDGE SENT THE CAR SLIDING QUICKLY THROUGH THE COLD WET RAIN, ALONG THE MEAN STREETS OF THE JUNGLE THAT WAS THE CITY. IT WAS ALMOST OVER NOW. HE NEEDED A LONG REST AND HE DIDN'T KNOW IF HE COULD GO ON DOING HIS JOB EVEN AFTER HE'D HAD IT, BUT RIGHT NOW HE DIDN'T CARE.

Pandemonium in the stands.

Word count at 9985.

AND SAM SLEDGE, AS LONELY AND EMPTY AS THE NIGHT ITSELF, DROVE FASTER TOWARD HOME.

THE END.

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The claxon sounded.

Above the din the amplified voice of the PA announcer began shouting, "Final score: Rex Sackett 10,000, Leon Culp 9449. Rex Sackett is the new Prose Bowl champion!"

Fans were spilling out of the stands; security personnel came rushing out to throw a protective cardon around me. But I didn't move. I just sat and stared up at the board.

I had won.

And I didn't feel anything at all.

The Cranker was waiting for me in my locker room.

I still wasn't feeling anything when my Seconds delivered me to the door, ten minutes after the final horn. I didn't want to see anybody while I had that emptiness. Not the New-Sport reporters and the TriDim announcers who would be waiting at the victory press conference. Not even Sally, or Mom and Dad, or Mort.

I told the Seconds and the two tunnel guards that I wanted to be alone for a few minutes. Then I went into the locker room, and hurried over to the container of Fuel. I had three ounces poured out and in my hand when Culp came out of the back alcove.

"Hello, kid," he said.

I stared at him. His sudden appearance had taken me by surprise and I couldn't think of anything to say.

"I came over under the stands after they took me off," he said. "One of the guards is a friend of mine and he let me in. You mind?"

A little shakily, I took some of the Fuel. It helped me find my voice. "No," I said, "I don't mind, Cranker."

"Leon," he said. "Just plain Leon Culp. I'm not The Cranker any more."

"Sure you are. You're still The Cranker and you're still the best there is, no matter what happened today. A legend...."

He laughed — a hoarse, humorless sound. He'd had a lot more Fuel before coming over here, I could see that. Still, he looked better than he had on the field, more composed.

He said, "Legend? There aren't any legends, kid. Just pros, good and bad. And the best of us are remembered only as long as we keep on winning, stay near the top. Nobody gives a damn about the has-beens and the losers."

"The fans could never forget you—"

"The fans? Hell, you heard them out there when the pressure got to me and I lost it in the stretch. Boos, nothing but boos. It's just a game to them. You think they understand what it's like for us inside, the loneliness and the pain? You think they understand it's not a game for us at all? No, kid, the fans know I'm finished. And so does everybody else in the business."

"You're not finished," I said. "You'll come back again next season."

"Don't be naive. My agent's already called it quits, and there's not another ten-percenter who'll touch me. Or a League Editor either. I'm through

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in the pros, kid."

"But what'll you do?"

"I don't know," he said. "I never saved any of the money; I'm almost as broke now as when I started thirty-five years ago. Maybe I can get a job coaching in one of the Junior Leagues — anything that'll buy bread and Fuel. It doesn't matter much, I guess."

"It matters to me."

"Does it? Well, you're a pro, you understand the way it is. I figured you might."

There seemed to be a thickness in my throat; I swallowed against it. "I understand," I said.

"Then let me give you a little advice. If you're smart, this will be your last competition too. You've got the prize money; invest it right and you can live on it for the rest of your life; you'll never have to write another line. Go out a winner, kid, because if you don't maybe someday you'll go out just like me."

He raised a hand in a kind of awkward salute and shuffled over to the door panel.

"Cranker — wait."

He turned.

"What you typed out there at the end, about the stuff we do being garbage. Did you really mean it?"

A small bitter smile curved his mouth. "What do you think, kid?" he said and turned again and went out into the tunnel. The panel slid shut behind him and he was gone.

I sat down in front of the Fuel container. But I didn't want any more of it now; I didn't need it. The emptiness was gone. I could feel again, waves of feeling.

I knew now why I had been so hollow when the Face-Off ended; talking to The Cranker had made me admit the truth. It wasn't because of exhaustion, as I'd wanted to believe. It was because everything he'd said about the business I had intuited myself on the field. And it was because of the insight I'd had at halftime — that The Cranker and I were soul brothers and in going up against him I was going up against myself; that beating him would be, and *was*, a little like beating myself.

But there was something else too, the most important thing of all. Culp was the one who had broken under the pressure, yet it could just as easily have been Rex Sackett. Could still be Rex Sackett in some other match, some other Prose Bowl — typing GARBAGE GARBAGE and then stumbling around on a lonely field, weeping.

Go out a winner, kid, because if you don't maybe someday you'll go out just like me.

I had already made a decision; I didn't even need to think about it. Sally and my parents would be the first ones I'd tell, then Mort, and after that I would make an official announcement at the press conference.

It was all over for The Cranker and all over for me too.

This would be my last Prose Bowl.

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LETTERS

Fantasy Books and Joanna Russ

I must take exception to the Books column by Joanna Russ in your February issue. I am not often moved to write in this manner, but this column can not be ignored.

Dispensing with the argument about whether such a column is more properly a simple "good read-bad read" guide, or complex literary criticism such as Russ contributes, let's deal with the column as printed. It has been written that a critic must do two things: decide whether she likes or dislikes a piece; more importantly, give solid, cogent reasons for these preferences. If these reasons can not be supplied, or amount to nothing more than a disagreement with the author's politics or philosophy, then we are dealing not with criticism, but with personal idiosyncrasies.

Russ seldom rises above this idiosyncratic level. This is unfortunate, since when she does, as in her comments about *Rime Isle*, she is truly insightful; however, flashes of insight can not compensate for pages of snobbery.

First, Russ appears to expect every writer to share her views on feminism and to write accordingly. The fact that this could often result in false, unrealistic characters does not seem to occur to her. Neither does she realize that not everyone shares her opinions, whether about feminism, or the advantages and disadvantages of the 19th Century versus the 20th.

Next, she often falls prey to the habit of telling the author, and her audience, how the story should have been written, how she would have written it. Coupled with the fault mentioned above, it seems that she is trying to give herself the illusion of infallibility. Her comments on Harlan Ellison and Stephen Donaldson quickly dispel that illusion. Russ's choice of an ending for "Jeffty is Five" is completely at variance with the mood, tone, and, I believe, the intention of the story. Her indictment of Donaldson for not having his hero explain leprosy more effectively in chapter five of *Lord Foul's Bane* conveniently ignores the fact that, given evidence presented in chapters five and four, such an explanation is the equivalent of defining color to someone blind from birth.

Neither of these faults, however, are as damning as ignorance, especially when that ignorance tries to pose as intelligence in support of prejudice. In her attack on the 19th Century, in a footnote, Russ indicates that she believes tuberculosis is contracted from contaminated food; it is contracted, my encyclopedia informs me, by inhaling airborne spoors. A small point, but one which detracts from everything she writes. Then there are her comments on heroic fantasy.

Russ makes a mistake which seems to be common among those with basically a science fiction orientation, since Andrew J. Offutt, in his *Swords Against Darkness* anthology, makes the same one; equating heroic fantasy with sword and sorcery. They are not the same, no more than space opera and top flight science fiction are. In order to support some of her prejudices

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about the form she quotes the fiction of C. S. Lewis and George MacDonald, a theologian who used his fiction for a sermon, and a man best known for children's books such as *The Princess and the Goblin.* Rather than assume that she simply chose to ignore the heroic fantasy of William Morris, Lord Dunsany, Poul Anderson, Fletcher Pratt, Peter Beagle and Patricia McKillip, because they contradict her, I must think that she is unfamiliar with them. This is a particularly distressing lack in a critic trying to comment intelligently on heroic fantasy.

Russ may be a good writer, I have not read enough of her fiction to decide, but as a critic of fantasy, and particularly of heroic fantasy, she leaves a great deal to be desired. If her prejudices and failings extend to other areas of fiction review, as I am afraid they do, then she is not a critic at all, despite being printed as one. This is a shame, since her column may keep readers away from several rewarding books. I would hope that the editor will think twice before allowing her to do the Books section again.

—*James P. Hanrahan*

Dear Joanna Russ:

In your "book review" in the February F&SF, you stated that "real change is the one thing that 'heroic fantasy' (with its aim of wish-fulfillment) must avoid at all costs." *Lord Foul's Bane* may be evidence in support of such a statement (I haven't read the book and can't make that judgment), but *The Lord of the Rings* certainly is not.

Concerning the "fixity" of Tolkien's characters: Aragorn, whom you chose as an example of this "fixity," undergoes drastic change, from a disrespected Ranger of the North to the King of Gondor and Arnor, with a corresponding change in his character; he remains virtuous, but the crowned Heir of Isildur would not taunt a village innkeeper as Strider taunted Barliman Butterbur. And Aragorn is the least changed of all the major characters.

By bringing in *The Lord of the Rings* as an example, you destroyed the force of your argument.

—*Mark Pundurs*

Dear Mr. Ferman:

As a long time reader and a great fan of your magazine, I was aghast at the book review section in your February, 1979, issue.

I have a question that came immediately to my mind: why did you enlist a person who hates fantasy as a genre to review fantasy books? Ms. Russ did not attempt to discuss the books in terms of writing style, characterization, story line, or any other legitimate area of review. Instead, she simply dismissed them, because they were fantasy.

If Ms. Russ does not approve of J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy masterpiece, assuredly the best of the genre, how can she assume to review lesser works in the same field? Must all books have a message to cram down the reader's throat or give some dark warning of the effects of modern technology gone too far? Can we not, for just a few hours, enter a world or return to a time where honor and bravery still thrive

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and good triumphs in the end? Must we continually listen to Harlan Ellison expound again and again on the wickedness in our souls, and in all life in general?

Perhaps the fact that Ms. Russ adores Harlan Ellison and hates fantasy while I enjoy fantasy and cannot abide the stories of Ellison shows that there is a vast difference in our outlook of life. She is a hard core realist and I, most assuredly, am a dreamer. Thank God! For without dreamers, who would have believed that bread mold could be medicine or that man could walk on the moon! Realists see the world and say, "Look. See how awful!" Dreamers view the same scene and dream of a better world. Realists look at society and reply that things never change, and dreamers change the world.

Why is "The Lord of the Rings" the best selling fiction book of all time? Why is the new movie based on it sold out at every showing? I hope it is because there are still dreamers who can escape this world and long for a better one. They will be the ones who build a new world.

—Debra A. Bacon

Joanna Russ replies

Dear Ed,

I'm glad to see people who feel strongly about what they read and who write to a magazine when they disagree vehemently with something. Both attitudes are, alas, rare. I think all the letters raise crucial questions about criticism and book reviewing. They deserve an answer longer and less hurried than any I can cobble up in the brief time before the copy deadline for this issue. If you'll allow, I'd like to do just that in the near future.*

Right now I'll address a couple of specific points; Mr. Hanrahan may well be right about the end of "Jeffty" (though the story hits very hard on "old" versus "new") but he's forgotten the tuberculin tests administered periodically to dairy herds. Apparently pasteurization isn't enough. At least that's how the matter was explained to me some twenty years ago in New York State, and I assume the tests were conducted elsewhere too and still are. My information may be out-of-date, but it's not fanciful.

—Joanna Russ

Delany deserves better

Dear Mr. Ferman:

I think that John Clute's review of Samuel Delany's *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (in *F&SF*, January 1979) does an important book quite an injustice. A reviewer has his problems — in that instance, trying to handle four books in a few pages — and I think Mr. Clute gave Delany a valiant try in the little space he had. But I wish he had given a better account of Delany's book, and perhaps not left the notion that it is better unread.

Delany deserves more, or better, or different. His talent and artistry as a writer of fiction are not to be doubted. Here, as a literary critic, he works formidably out of a background of philosophical and literary sources quite extraordinary in their range. And he has

(to page 162)

**This article, "In Defense of Criticism," has been completed and will be coming up soon.*

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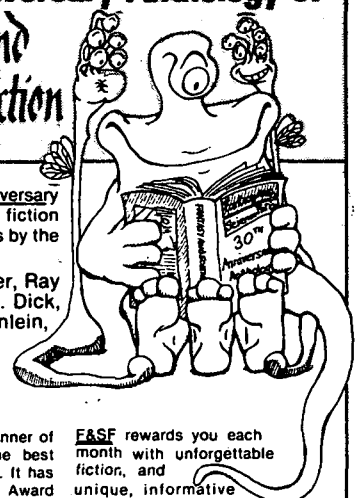

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(from page 159)

provided us (at least I think so) with a book of criticism that can be taken seriously.

Because I've been teaching literature for more than twenty years, I read quite a bit of literary criticism and scholarship. Because I have been reading SF for more than thirty years, I am sympathetic to the struggle of writers for recognition as craftsmen and artists against serious odds. It's true that SF is now in the academies, but only in a fragmented way; and it should be better represented and better thought of, there.

Now I'm not saying that Delany shouldn't be subjected to disagreements — not at all. What I am saying is that the kind of book he has written needs a lengthier, more detailed essay about it, possibly in *F&SF*. There should be plenty of readers who would want to hear about what Delany has said, his critical preconceptions, his language and strategies of criticism, the validity of his conclusions.

I believe you could do a real service by having someone, say, like Joanna Russ write you a critical essay on Delany's criticism. His book is very stimulating. I have already had occasion to use it in a science fiction course that I taught, and I expect to be able to use it very profitably in further teaching that I do. I, for one, would be reluctant to see people who should be reading it letting it go by because they received a vaguely unfavorable impression from the review you published. Delany deserves much better from all of us.

—Douglas Robillard
English Department
University of New Haven

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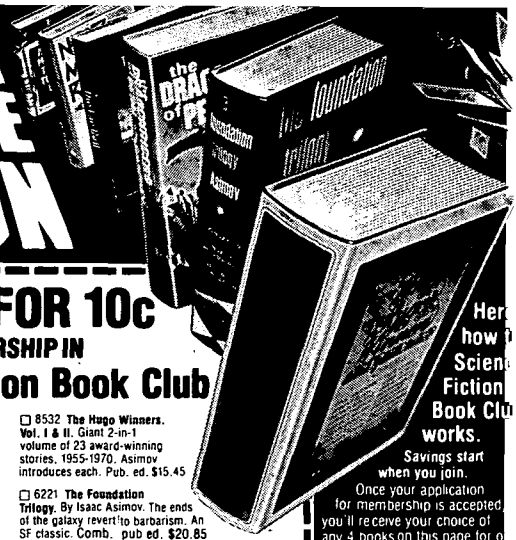

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